

# BESTSELLER

It's deadly at the top...

KEITH LATCH

*Champagne Books Presents*

# Bestseller

By

Keith Latch



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# ***Dedication***

For anyone who has ever set pen to the paper and brought  
fiction to life, this is for you.

It's deadly at the top.

## ***Prologue***

The Travel Inn Motor Lodge sat squat beside a four-lane highway. It was late evening, the lights of passing traffic blurring into rays of white and red. The smell of gasoline and diesel drifted far and wide.

He was in Iowa or Idaho, or maybe it was Michigan. He really didn't know anymore. More to the point, he didn't really care. A palm full of cash had dissuaded the desk clerk from asking too many questions. That was a good thing.

The key to his room, 23, was attached to a wide, odd-shaped piece of green plastic. The door creaked as he stepped into an obscenely ugly room. The carpet was a burnt orange, the drapes a sickly dark green. But the overhead light worked when he flipped the switch. The bed was made and looked all too inviting.

Before settling in, he returned to his car for his bags. One was a green duffel bag, the kind the military issued. But he was not an army man, nor would he ever be. The ritual that such a life entailed nauseated him. The other wasn't truly a bag, but a case.

Once back in the room, he removed items from the bag. A bottle of Jack Daniels. A small, tattered notebook, spiral-bound with a black, fading cover. A .38 Smith & Wesson revolver, loaded and ready to go.

There was a television in the room, but he did not turn it on. His mind was full, it could hold no more. Beside the bed on a small, cheaply made table were a phone and alarm clock radio. Neither distraction appealed to him. There was not one person in the world he wanted to talk to. And on the radio there would be nothing but the Bee Gees or some other mindless, stifling disco crap or worse, maybe even punk rock.

He grabbed a glass from the sink area, rinsed the dust from it and poured it half full with liquor.

He'd never been much of a drinker. Had never developed the taste or the stomach for it.

Still, he drained the glass before placing the hard, black guitar case on the bed. It wasn't all that bad, really. He flipped open the fasteners and pulled out the instrument, a recent purchase from abroad. A 1978 Les Paul EG500. The Cherry Sunburst color made it about the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in the world.

But the six-string was not a source of pride or awe for him. It was simply a tool. A way of release.

He cradled the guitar, the base over a knee and the fingerboard held lightly, almost lovingly in his left hand. He didn't use a pick; instead he pulled a shiny dime out of his pocket. Automatically, his left hand hit a chord and he strummed the dime over the strings. The guitar made a metallic clanging sound, nothing like if it had been hooked to an amplifier.

Another chord, then another. Before long, he had the intro to a new song. It came effortlessly, as they always seemed to. Within five minutes, he had the intro carved into his memory. Then the opening verse. Lyrics, too, came unabashed when he was writing. He sang them slowly, softly.

Soon, the song worked itself out. He took frequent breaks to write in his notebook with a Bic pen. He called the song, "Man at the Door."

The thrum of steel strings and his low, melodic voice filled the small hotel room. But he didn't hear his guitar; he didn't even hear his own voice. He listened to the music in his head. The music that was always there. Melody, notes and bars, bridges, everything.

After a while, he was able to stop, the song committed to memory. He could easily work the details out later. The drum line, the bass line—all that could be fitted around the guitar and the lyrics.

But there wasn't going to be a later.

He fished a brown prescription bottle from the same pocket the dime had earlier emerged. He pulled the top off and inside was pills every color of the rainbow. He had long ago forgotten their true names. To him blue meant sleep, red to wake, yellow was to make you happy, and orange was to

forget. He tapped out several into his hand, selected three blues, and three oranges. The rest he dropped back into the bottle.

He poured another swallow of whisky into his glass and was about to swallow the six pills when there was a knock at the door.

~ \* ~

It had taken a lot to get here. Many miles and many years. *Why* she was here, however, was a question without an easy answer. Could it be love? Could it be devotion? She hardly thought so. Perhaps it was nothing but habit. That seemed more likely an answer than anything else. Though, even that wasn't quite right.

Before the madness, before the hookers and reporters and the disc jockeys stole him away, she had tracked his every move, and continued to follow him even now. It was a long, arduous journey and her body betrayed her, highlighting the ravages of the ordeal. She was no longer young, but not yet old enough to have the deep lines that ran like dry rivers at the corners of her mouth and eyes.

But they were there nonetheless.

She hadn't seen him in such a very long time. The world had been a different place then, he a different man. She could only hope that some semblance of his old self still lurked beneath the monster he had become. Perhaps it was too harsh to call him a monster, but she didn't think so. Even though he'd barred her from his life, she'd paid attention. How could she not? Stories of him were everywhere. Whether rumors, facts, or flat-out lies, one would never know. But she could guess. Yes, she could do that.

She recognized the car at the front of room 23. A red, shiny Corvette with white-lettered tires. Wherever he went, he was quick to find him a 'Vette. When they were younger, he'd been obsessed with the car. Back then, such luxury had been far beyond his reach. But not anymore. Times, they were a-changing.

She was dressed in denim bellbottoms and a tight tank top. Her long, soft hair cascaded down her back, over her shoulders. She ran a hand through her hair and dusted the hay from her clothes.

The hay had come from her ride over from Des



Moines. She was lucky to get a lift and when the farm couple offered, she couldn't turn it down just because she'd be riding in the back of the pickup with hay and a big pig they called Toko. She'd been appreciative of the ride; she only hoped she didn't stink to high heaven.

She hadn't known he'd been here, only that he was on his way out of Des Moines. She'd lucked up when the pickup had suffered a flat tire near the turnoff to the motor lodge. As she watched the old man with his straw hat and overalls change the tire, she'd spotted the Corvette in the parking lot.

She'd known it belonged to him.

And now here she was. As jittery as a school girl on her very first date. Why did she think things would be different now? Why did she believe he would welcome her with open arms?

The truth of the matter was that she didn't. But she was tired of living without him, of falling asleep every night with a picture of him in her mind that most often bled over into both her dreams and nightmares.

Life was no longer good for her. It had gone from brilliant color to a washed out gray. Her home seemed a million miles away. She left it all for this man. And he didn't even know it.

He was both the best thing that had ever happened to her and the worst. All rolled into one very talented but very flawed human being.

With a hesitant fist, she knocked on the door.

"Johnny," she said. Her voice was frail and timid. "It's me, Lily."

No answer. Not even a shuffling of feet on the carpet. No tug at the curtains. No nothing. She knocked again. "Johnny," she called, louder.

Had she come all this way just to be turned away by a closed door?

Time seemed to stop, as did her heart.

She tried the knob but it was locked. She knew it would be. At least she'd tried. She'd done that much. She wasn't about to make a scene. He probably had a girl in there with him. Some teenybopper with a big chest and not much going on between the ears. She'd heard that he'd turned into a real sexual animal. The thought sickened her

and she pushed it from her mind as if it were a tangible thing.

Moths swam in the light of the single bulb beside the door. The hot summer night was humid, harsh.

"Okay. If that's the way you want it." She turned and began to walk away. Defeated and broken, she didn't know what else to do.

~ \* ~

Johnny froze.

It wasn't the calling of his name, but the sound of the voice speaking it. Years came rolling back. A kaleidoscope of memories from a happier, saner life spun into him and for a moment he froze. Johnny couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything.

*Lily, his mind muttered. Could it really be? After so much time, was she really here?*

Then the force that held his body and his tongue loosened and he was in control of his faculties once again.

Fortunately, he thought to hide the gun before rising from the bed. He pushed it deep down into his duffel.

When he opened the door, he took an involuntary gasp of air. He held the pills tightly in his hand but there was no hiding the whisky on his breath.

"Johnny?" she asked. "After all this time, is it really you?"

Saying nothing, Johnny chewed on his bottom lip. She was different, yet the same. What had it been? Eight, nine years? Maybe even ten. Certainly another life ago.

Still silent, he motioned for her to come in. He couldn't help but notice how Lily looked behind her, as if hoping someone would stop her. But no one did. He smelled her as she stepped past. She came so close that he could feel her breath on him. For the slightest of moments, he thought she might stop, wrap him up in her arms. But would he let her if she tried? Was this what he wanted?

The decision was made for him as she stepped on and past.

Once in the room, she turned to face him.

"You look...good," she lied. It wasn't that she was a bad liar. It might've ringed true if he hadn't known better. But he had let his body go. His hair, always worn long, was

now too long and in need of a good washing. His beard and mustache had grown scraggy. His once thin frame had thickened like gristle and an obtrusive gut hung over his belt. All in all, he was almost unrecognizable as the young man he'd been less than a decade ago. Living hard and living fast wasn't conducive to a healthy body.

"So do you." And he meant that. Lily looked just as good as she had when they were together. Her body was svelte without being too thin. Her green eyes were sharp and watchful, but kind and concerned as well. She had been a true beauty back then and she was beautiful now. But he could see the wear on her. Much too much for her thirty years. "How did you know that I was here?"

"Not too many Corvettes like that around the farmland."

"You were at the show?"

"Couldn't afford a ticket. But I could hear you from outside the hall."

Johnny looked down at the obscene orange carpeting. "You're a long way from home. Heard you got married."

"Home's not like it used to be. And no, I wasn't married. Engaged, but never married."

"I...I've been meaning to—"

She silenced him with a wave of her hand. "I didn't come here for a lie, Johnny. I didn't come here to make you feel sorry for me. I came here to see you, to be near you...if only for a while. The real you; not the man on the television, not the voice on the records, not your drugged smile in a magazine. But the real you. The you I've loved for so long. The man I've ached for all these years."

Her words were like sweet heroin, soaking deep into him. But as she moved towards him, he started backward. "I am not that man anymore, Lily." He turned away from her, staring at the cheap art print framed by plastic on the wall. "I can never be him again."

"And I'm not the same starry-eyed girl that you left on that rainy April night. I'm a woman now. Life's taught me a thing or two. Things like that when one door closes, there's always another to slam in your face. That opportunity only knocks once, and if you aren't listening just right, you might not even hear it. But there are good things, too. Like you.

Even when you left, I still had you. I played a record or listened to the radio. I had a poster of you, of the rock god Johnny Krueger on my wall until I got evicted last year. But I still have the poster, at my mom's. I know it's not you, not really. But it helps, a little. Sometimes a little means a lot. Y'know?"

"Since you said that I don't owe you a lie, I'm not going to lie now. There have been a lot of women. I'm sure if you read my press, you already know that." He walked to his bottle and poured a generous amount into the glass. He drank it down and waited for the liquid fire to consume him, to numb his teeth and gums, to make his fingertips tingle. It didn't take long. "But they were nothing more than distractions, warm bodies in the dead of night."

Lily closed her eyes and cupped her face in her hands. "I don't want to hear this."

"What do you want to hear, Lily? You want to hear that I've turned into a saint? That I'm the world's only celibate musician? Well, that's not true. You knew better before you walked through that door. But I will tell you something that you might not know."

Lily pulled her hands from her face. Her eyes opened.

Johnny had rehearsed this a million times, but never once expected to actually say it. "I left only because I couldn't stay. That might sound foolish, but it's the truth."

"I wouldn't expect you to say any different. Like I said, I'm not here for excuses. Far from it."

"It's no excuse. It's a fact. If I had stayed, you would have been a lot worse off."

"Look at me, Johnny. Really look at me. Look past my face, into my soul. Do you think I could be any worse off than I am now?"

"I...I..."

"Enough of this, okay?" Lily came to him. Her body was taut and tense as she melded into him. She smelled sweet and clean, pure and right. He could almost remember her touch, but the years and the drugs had caused the distinctiveness to fade. Now, it came rushing back and it felt good. It felt like coming home. "Just one night. That's all I want. Just one more night." Her voice was soft, but the plea was evident.

Johnny turned his back to her and reached for his drink. In one smooth motion, he popped the pills into his mouth and swallowed them down with the amber liquid. When he faced her again, he thought everything might just work out.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Tonight is ours."

~ \* ~

It was the dead of night when he awoke from the nightmare. The room was dark and Lily lay naked in the bed beside him. Even in the shadows, he could see the slow and steady rise and fall of her chest. Her smooth, flawless skin had been a hot fire and had melted the ice that had formed over his soul.

But now that ice was back. Black and cold and freezing.

It could never be the same again. There was no going back. He knew this now as well as he knew that he loved this woman so much it hurt. That was what made it so much harder.

Lily slept on her side, facing him. He leaned into her and gently pressed his lips against her warm cheek. She stirred slightly but was evidently in the grasp of deep sleep, so she didn't wake. Johnny pulled himself out of the bed, slowly and easily. Naked, he stood, grabbed his duffel, and went into the bathroom.

As he flipped on the light, he noticed his hand was shaking. He shouldn't have awakened. He'd taken more than enough of his "medicine" to sleep through not only the night but most of the next day as well. But, oddly, he didn't feel even the vaguest sense of a high. His mind was amazingly clear.

He took that as a sign that he was doing the right thing.

He pulled the revolver from his bag and took a seat on the toilet. The chrome of the .38 shone under the buttery bathroom light. There was music in his head. Lyrics, too. But the words were of death, of loneliness, and they grew louder and louder.

By the time the barrel of the gun pushed over his teeth and pressed against the uvula and the back of his throat, the music was so loud it felt like ice picks were

piercing his ears.

He had lived too long like this. Much too long.

And now it was time for the music to be over.

For the curtain to fall.

For the final bow.

Goodbye to a life that had been strange and terrifying, and to one that had been better than he had any right to have lived.

With the thumb of his right hand he pulled back the hammer.

He tasted gun oil and metal in his mouth. Strangely, it wasn't disgusting. It was as if he'd always been meant to end it this way.

He pulled the trigger.

In the time it took for the round to leave the chamber and thunder forward, he had one last thought.

*Was it Iowa, Idaho, or Michigan?*

His head exploded, and the wall of the tiny bathroom was splattered with bits of gray matter, splashes of blood, and chunks of hair and bone, while the only woman he'd ever loved woke to the horrible sound of a gunshot.

# One

*Death came like a thief in the night.*

Rob Caulder blinked open his eyes to bright, unfocused light with those eight words crisp in his head. Shapes, fuzzy and indeterminate, shimmered at his periphery. His eyelids snapped shut and for a time he slept.

But his slumber was not restful.

The car, a worn-out Chrysler Le Baron, white paint peeling badly, spun on the asphalt. The rubber left the road.

Rob had ridden the Tilt-a-Whirl down at the fair when he was twelve. Unfortunately, he hadn't had the foresight at that young age to not scarf down a foot long chili dog with onions before his turn on the swirling, swooshing contraption. He'd gotten very sick that day. That's what it had been like when he'd lost control of the car—crazy and nauseating.

Bursting glass, screeching metal.

Then the world had gone all too dark, all too quickly.

The man was there. Rob couldn't make out his face, only his form. A dark silhouette against a doorway of blinding white light. Though unable to see the facial features, he knew, just *knew* they were awful.

Then the form faded and there was nothing. An absolute, soothing nothing.

When his eyes opened again, his vision was clearer. A sour-faced woman stood over him. "Well, well," she said. A smile then brightened her face and made her look like a loving grandmother. "Look who's back among the living."

Rob opened his mouth to speak, but the words came as a croak. His throat was dry, so very dry. He tried to move,

to sit up. His body was lead, his head a boulder. Even awake, the memory of the dream remained real, vivid, as he attempted to understand where he was.

The strange woman patted his arm. "You be still. I'll get the doctor."

*Doctor?*

The word brought awareness. Suddenly, he heard the steady beep of a heart monitor. An IV tube protruded from the tender skin of his hand and he could feel the oxygen lines plugging his nostrils.

The walls of the square little room were drab, an eggshell white. A television sat atop a black metal stand affixed to the wall directly in front of him. The minimal furniture was bland and generic.

Ellen Caulder walked into the room and rushed over to him. Rob's eyes were suddenly moist at the sight of his wife. She threw her arms around his neck. She smelled like sunshine and laundry detergent.

A man popped up beside Ellen. A mousy-looking fellow with a well-trimmed moustache and deep set, beady eyes.

"Oh, Robbie. I've been praying. Just praying for you. Are you okay? How do you feel? Are you in pain? Do you—"

"Please, Mrs. Caulder. I need to check your husband." Ellen only nodded. Then, as she slipped back, the doctor came closer.

"W...What happened?" Rob asked. His voice was hoarse and sounded nothing like his own.

"You suffered brain trauma in an automobile accident. You had some swelling of the tissue. A surgical procedure was necessary to alleviate the pressure."

The doctor pulled a small silver cylinder from the pocket of his white lab coat and directed a small beam of light into his eyes. "Good." The cold sting of a stethoscope came next.

Rob felt the soft tug of unconsciousness. Within seconds it was too strong for him to resist and he was gone again into a black abyss.

When he woke next, the room was dark. The TV was on but the sound turned down low. He could move his head now.

To his left was a long rectangle of a window. The



blinds had been drawn and the outside world was lost to him. To his right, Ellen sat, half-reclined, in a chair that appeared to be the epitome of discomfort.

In the blue flicker of the television, he looked at Ellen, at his wife. Even in sleep, she look troubled, worried. Her delicate face was bunched into a mask of concern. Her dark hair lay tussled about her face. She was dressed in a tee shirt; a thin blanket had been sprawled over her.

She was making her night sounds. Many times Rob had fallen asleep to those sounds. It was snoring, he supposed. But like Ellen, it was delicate and adorable. A soft hiss of air though her nose.

With a weak hand, he reached out for her and touched her elbow.

She roused immediately, a bright twinkle erupting in her eyes. She shook her head as if shaking away the dust of her dreams. "Rob?"

"Elle. Hey, doll." His throat was no longer so dry and he sounded more like himself now.

"Are you okay? Do you need anything?" She was up on her feet, the blanket falling away. She wore red cotton shorts. Her tanned legs ran long and fine.

He didn't say a word, only clutched her hand.

"I was so worried. All I could think about was you not waking up. Not ever. Not ever again. And then I thought that you would, but you wouldn't remember me."

"It's okay. I'm all right. And I could never forget you."

She stroked his face with her free hand. Her touch was like warm silk.

His head swam, but he was determined to stay awake. "Tell me what happened. About the wreck."

"You can't recall?"

Rob shook his head but stopped when a flower of white pain blossomed. "No," he said with a grunt. "The only thing is the spinning and the crash."

Ellen nodded and told him what happened. He'd been on his way to work. Rob worked as a night watchman at a factory in Ivy Spring's industrial park. C.A.T, Combined Asset Technologies, a firm that produces specialized components for security systems. He worked the midnight until eight a.m. shift and had left the house a little after eleven. The drive

only took about fifteen minutes or so, but there had been a strong thunderstorm and he'd wanted the extra time so he could drive cautiously. Apparently, he hadn't been careful enough.

The car hydroplaned on the slick, wet road, on the highway leading into town. Just two miles from home. The stretch of four-lane was on a steep decline into town. On one side was a Tractor Supply Co., and on the other were the three bodies of water that unified to make Liddon Lake. Off to the side of the water was a crumbling building and a large pool that had been filled in with dirt a decade ago. Years ago, it had been Ivy Spring's public pool. With concerns of communicable diseases and the fact that privately-owned pools were becoming affordable, the pool had gone out of business.

Rob remembered the summers he'd spent there. While his parents both worked, the girl across the street babysat him until he was ten. During the long summer breaks, Stacy would load Rob into the car and they'd spend whole days at the pool. Nice girl, and pretty, too. Rob also recalled that while he played with kids his own age, Stacey was busy flirting with all the high school guys. Too young to truly be jealous when it came to girls, Rob thought the arrangement was grand.

The car had spun off the road, down the steep hill, and rolled several times. The car was now unrecognizable. His forehead had cracked into the steering wheel with enough force to bend the column. Ellen informed him that Doctor Hill, the mousy, sneaky-eyed man, initially feared the worst: permanent brain damage, and if Rob hadn't been wearing his safety belt, he would have fared much worse.

CT scans and an array of other tests after the operation, however, dispelled those fears. The procedure to ease the swollen tissue had been completely successful. The only other injuries had been a split lip, bruised ribs, and two black eyes.

That had been a week ago.

"A week?" he asked, amazed.

"Tomorrow will make seven days."

Rob swallowed, his mouth parched once again. To have lost such an amount of time was almost beyond

comprehension. Seven days. 168 hours. Unbelievable.

"You've been here all this time?"

"Every single minute. Virginia's been covering for me at work."

"Elle, that's a long time to be holed up in a hospital room."

"Where else would I be?" A tired smile graced her lips and instantly he was certain the smile on her face was one of the most blessed things he would ever see.

"My head hurts." That was a true understatement. In fact, his head felt like a mason jar filled with angry wasps.

"Doc said it would. I'll call the nurse and have her bring you something for it."

"No." He reckoned that whatever painkiller they would give him would be a narcotic and put him out like a light. He wasn't ready for that. While their relationship was one of those where silence could be comfortable and even welcome at times, Rob now had so much he wanted to talk to her about. He did, after all, have a week to make up for.

Besides, he was in no big hurry to fall asleep and dream a dream of the faceless man again.

~ \* ~

It was another week before Rob was discharged from the hospital. Seven more long days filled with pills, pricks, tests, and IV tubes. If hell were a real place, Rob believed it wouldn't be much different than this place.

He'd successfully talked Ellen into going back to work. He wanted her with him, of course, but if she didn't go back they'd have no choice but to look for a replacement. And the Caulders needed every cent they could get.

Ellen worked as the assistant manager at a loan office in town. And while she was overly qualified for the position with her degree in business from the University of Mississippi, she wasn't getting paid what she was worth. But the job market was tough and he was thankful she wasn't working a production line in a factory. He, on the other hand, dropped out of college his third year. A stupid move, but he was convinced that within a year, two tops, he would have written a novel that would make enough money to justify the decision.

Now, almost seven years later, he was still working on

the first draft.

For the majority of his waking hours, Rob battled a horrendous headache, watched soaps on the TV, looked out the window, and tried to push both the words "*Death came like a thief in the night*" and the nightmare image of the shadow man out of his head.

But, it seemed every time he tried, the pain in his head grew by leaps and bounds.

Finally D-Day came, Discharge Day. It was a Friday and, thankfully, Rob's doctor made rounds early before heading off on a three day golf trip to North Carolina.

A hefty male nurse wheeled Rob, wearing comfortable sweats and holding a handful of written prescriptions, down to the lobby. Ellen walked beside him, discussing the follow up appointments she had scheduled for him. He'd never thought about how incredibly wonderful it could be to just go home.

Free of the cable and wires. Free of the intrusive nurses waking him every four hours to swallow a pill or check his vitals. Free of the awful dreck that passed as meals here, and from a hard mattress and lumpy pillows.

He was headed for his sofa in his living room. His television with its satellite dish channels. His shower, his bed, his computer, and his books.

Dr. Hill told him not to go back to work until the next appointment two weeks from now. Rob was fine with that. He had a few weeks of vacation time at work and a quick phone call to his boss made the leave financially bearable.

The trio—wife, nurse, and injured—rode the elevator to the lobby, and when the doors swished open Rob thought it a wonderful sound. The lobby was flooded with noon-time sunlight and people milling about. Regular people, without scrubs or hospital gowns draped over them.

Ellen's car was parked outside. When the electronic eye opened the doors for them, Rob had to stop himself from leaping to his feet and running circles around the gray Altima.

Rob refused help from the big nurse, but did not do the same when Ellen assisted him to bend down and get into the car. When his wife started the car and made sure he was buckled in properly, she engaged the transmission, and they

pulled from the covered portico. The sunlight, though weakened by the windows and windshield, felt invigorating on his pasty skin. If Rob never went back inside another building, he could live with that.

But he wasn't prepared for the motion sickness that overtook him when the car pulled out onto the street and began to pick up speed.

"What's wrong?"

"Getting a little dizzy," Rob answered when he was able.

"Want me to pull over?" She was already slowing the car.

"No, no," he said. "Just let me lay the seat back. I should be fine." Rob reclined the seat as far back as it would go and clamped his eyes shut. Beads of perspiration formed on his brow. Spinning. The blackness was spinning. Just like that night two weeks ago. He was anticipating the crash.

Spinning faster and faster.

Out of control.

Wild and frenzied.

Then, just as abruptly as the motion sickness had come over him, it was gone.

He cracked open the lid of one eye. Ellen was still behind the wheel just as she should be. One eye on the road, the other on him.

"Better?"

Rob nodded. Looking out the window, he saw the familiar sights of Ivy Springs roll by. Ellen slowed the car and, though always a conscientious driver, drove even more carefully.

The town was an idyllic village in the Deep South. It had the stereotypical town square with green trees lining the sidewalks downtown, a city park where it was still relatively safe to go after sundown, and neighbors who always waved as they passed. But Ivy Springs was growing as well. A Wal-Mart Super Center, a Big K-Mart, dozens of chain restaurants, franchise gas stations, a multitude of strip malls had been constructed over the past ten years or so. At this place in time, the town was balancing on the precipice of being not too big and not too small, but someday soon that balance would be lost. The big business would kill all the

family- and locally-owned establishments, and Ivy Springs would begin its ugly ascent from small town to city.

Not a stern traditionalist, Rob had nothing against big cities. In fact, he and Ellen enjoyed driving up to Memphis or even over to Atlanta on occasion. But visiting such metropolitan areas wasn't the same as living there. No sir'ee, thank you very much.

Their route from the hospital took them down a major four-lane highway, the very same one where he'd crashed fourteen days earlier. But Rob didn't think about that. He watched as they passed the stores, markets, and pharmacies under the faded blue sky and the bright, almost white light of an awesome sun.

"Y'know," Ellen said, "Since we're both off this weekend, your mom and dad wanted to see you, to spend some time with you. If you feel up to it tomorrow, what do you think about having them over for supper? I could make spaghetti."

"I'll just have to see how I feel."

"I know you'd rather not see them, Rob. But they are your folks."

"Yeah."

"You and Gary used to get along. Don't you think you could try to be amiable? At least for your mother's sake?"

"You're not the one he calls a deadbeat every chance he gets."

"Robert, you know he's never said that."

"Might as well have."

"He just thinks you should be doing more with your life. In his own way, he's trying to motivate you. I'm sure he just wants the best for you."

"Yeah. Like that job he offered me?"

"There's nothing wrong with being a plumber. It's a completely noble profession."

"Yeah. Cleaning out shitters and sucking cesspools sounds like a career without equal."

"Look, we don't have to. It was just a suggestion..." Ellen's voice trailed off. Rob looked out the window and saw why. On the far side of the road, the vague tire marks were still visible. Two black scorches veered off the incline, the bottom fifteen to twenty feet down. From his position, Rob

couldn't see the bottom, but that was fine by him.

It was like a cloud had passed over the sun. Rob could see Ellen whiten as they passed. He could also hear the engine rev as she pressed harder on the accelerator. Then they were passed. The cloud was gone and color returned to his wife's face.

Ellen flipped the blinker and they turned onto the road they had known as the way home for over five years. The road had seen much better days. Random pot holes and washouts ran the length of Oak Grove Road making the car bounce, its suspension taxed as they continued on. They passed one of Ivy Springs' two golf courses. The green rolling expanse covered by golfers intent on sinking their tiny white balls into one of eighteen holes. Rob tried his hand at the sport once or twice, but never developed much affection for it. Of course, that hadn't stopped him and a few buddies from polishing off a case or two of Coors.

Ellen slowed the car as they crossed a rickety wooden bridge that carried them over a railroad track far below. Another left, then straight for a mile. They passed the Ivy Springs town limits sign and were bound for the country.

The long gravel drive to the Caulder house came not a moment too soon for Rob. Red gravel stretched a few hundred yards through a field of tall grass. At the end was a country style farmhouse framed by two large oaks in the front. The farm house was white with navy blue shutters on every window, the shingles, a deep black. The car dusted up gravel as it made the slow trek down the drive. The closer they got, the better Rob felt.

Ellen had inherited the house from her maternal grandmother. Ellen had no brothers or sisters and her parents died in a plane crash when she was only a teenager. Grandma Gladys had been her only living relative, at least until five years ago. The young Ellen had lived in this same house from the time her parents passed away until she'd moved off to college. There she'd started dating Rob. Though they'd known each other in high school, it wasn't until they were both attending Ole Miss that they really hit it off.

The house was a fine thing among rough fields that had once produced cotton, soy beans, and even corn. Now, the dry earth only yielded weeds and the occasional

sunflower or honeysuckle vine. Though the old house required constant repair, it was still a grand home and both he and Ellen were immensely proud of it.

"Home sweet home," Ellen said as she killed the car's engine in front of the house.

"I swear to God it is." It sure was good to be home.



## ***Two***

Rob crashed on the couch as soon as Ellen helped him inside. He was able to walk, but his legs were still weak from disuse. Drained, all he wanted to do was sleep. He gave no thought to what he might find on the other side of consciousness and at the moment, he didn't care.

While he slept, Ellen went back into town, got his prescriptions filled and picked up a few groceries. He never even knew she was gone.

When Rob awoke, the light filtering in through the curtains was golden, and he knew the day was getting late. He heard Ellen in the kitchen rattling around. Pots clinked and pans clacked. He could smell soup—vegetable soup—and his stomach growled for something besides the bland, cardboard concoctions of the hospital cafeteria.

His sleep hadn't been plagued by nightmares but when he woke, he fully appreciated what the term "splitting headache" meant. His vision was doubled, everything fuzzy and out of focus.

He made it to a standing position and shook his head a few times. His eyesight cleared. He had to take tiny, baby steps, but he made it across the wide living room to the open doorway of the kitchen. Ellen stood there in a pair of denim shorts and a white tee shirt. The radio over the kitchen sink was turned low and she swayed as she sang along to it. Her back was to him as she worked at the stove. Her dark brown hair was lustrous and shiny under the four-bulb fixture. He saw the scar on the back of her left calf; a thin white line creasing through the smooth tanned flesh of her leg. She'd gotten it a year after they'd moved into the house. It had

been one of those times when they'd thought they were younger than they actually were. There was an old apple tree out back, its trunk split into a Y only two feet from the ground. For some reason lost to memory, they decided to try to climb it. Silly, but in a good way. They were always doing stuff like that together. Or at least they used to.

They'd made it as far up as they dared. Any further and the branches would've been too small and spindly to support them. After staring across the open fields for a while, not to mention a stolen kiss or two, they'd headed back down. First Ellen, then Rob behind her. All had gone well until Ellen had placed a tennis shoed foot in the Y of the tree. Somehow, she'd lost her balance and slid out of the tree, the rough bark scraping her leg.

After making sure that his wife would live, Rob had joked for weeks afterward, telling her, "Well, at least we know you aren't half monkey." Looking back now, that was one of the last times they had enjoyed their youth, truly reveled in it. Nowadays, the bills came regularly, work demanded sacrifices, and the true realities of adulthood were firmly entrenched upon them. The laughter of youth finally died away.

The entire kitchen smelled of cooked vegetables. While nowhere near as proficient as in the kitchen as her grandmother, Ellen could hold her own against anyone else Rob knew, his mother included. Her cooking was wonderful, exceptionally so. In a small garden in the back yard, she grew enough vegetables to last them all year: tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, squash, back-eye peas, cabbage, carrots, cantaloupe, and watermelon. If it could be grown in the fertile Mississippi soil, Ellen could grow it. Not that Rob didn't lend a hand; he helped sow the seeds, weed the rows, and helped harvest. But Ellen seemed to take special enjoyment in the process and would often spend hour upon hour either tending to the vegetables or the flowers and shrubs scattered around the property.

The soup she was preparing this evening was no doubt freshly made and, and though Rob preferred soups and chili in the colder times of the year, the aroma was making his mouth water.

With a silver ladle, Ellen stirred the contents of the

stainless steel pot as if it were the most important thing in the world. Nothing existed except the music pluming from the small radio and her batch of soup.

Such a good woman, Rob thought. He moved silently across the room. He hugged her tightly from behind. She wasn't startled.

"I love you to death, Rob. But I hope you never try your hand at burglary."

"You heard me coming?"

"Like an elephant through a china shop. You drag your feet when you walk, y'know."

"I wasn't aware of that." He twirled her toward him. Their faces were only inches apart.

"You're feeling better?"

"Yeah. A lot. It's great to be home again."

"It's great to have you home."

Instead of kissing her, Rob bowed his forehead into hers. At six feet tall, Rob was a full six inches taller than his wife and towered over her. Another song came on the radio, one he knew well. He grabbed both of her hands and began to dance slowly, softly.

"Easy, boy. Don't overdo it."

"Don't worry about that. I'll be back to a hundred percent before you even know it."

They danced all the way through that song. And the next. They ceased dancing only when an advertisement for a prescription medication for erectile dysfunction came on.

"You hungry?"

"I could eat the south end of a north-bound horse."

"Hopefully, it'll taste better than that."

It did. Instead of the kitchen table, they took their bowls of soup into the living room. Ellen pulled a TV tray up to Rob's favorite chair, a threadbare brown La-Z-Boy that should've been thrown out before he'd even bought it. Ellen sat on the couch and they watched television and talked and ate as the evening became night.

"I've got your medicine if you need it," she said about nine o'clock. They were both tired and ready for bed.

"I can't get rid of this headache. The doc says it'll fade, but it's like a butcher knife sliced down the center of my brain."

"You've got painkillers. You want 'em?"

"I think I'd better if I plan to sleep tonight."

He downed two Vicodin with a glass of water and Ellen helped him upstairs to the bedroom. It was the first time he'd been up here since coming home. The sight of his bed and its wonderful soft mattress was alluring. He let go of his wife's hand and stepped over to the bed. There was a phone, a small lamp and a stack of books on the nightstand at his side of the bed.

Customarily, whether he was off or had worked through the night, Rob read at least an hour in bed before going to sleep. To just slide between the sheets and drift off to sleep was something he just ordinarily could not do. Rob was a huge fan of Hemingway's work, his favorite being *Islands in the Stream* closely followed by *The Old Man and the Sea*. If he was in the mood for a little something different, he read Faulkner. His tastes drifted more to the classic and literary than the blockbusters of today. While he was sure there was nothing wrong with a novel by John Grisham or James Patterson, after reading something like that, he was always left wanting. Not so with the old masters. In their worlds there was a sense of purpose, of substance, of reality. If Rob wanted nonstop action or sexual tension, well, he had the boob tube for that.

But tonight, his head pained him so much that reading would be next to impossible. It had been that way since waking up in the hospital after the wreck. He missed reading, but when the headaches lessened he would be right back at it.

"I think I'm going to take a shower," Ellen said as she selected night clothes from the chest of drawers. "Think you can wait up for me?"

"I'll do my best," Rob grinned. But already he could feel the Vicodin working its magic. His head felt better, but his body was starting to feel light, almost weightless, and he wasn't sure he could fight off sleep for very long.

"Be right back," she said and disappeared behind the door to their master bath. Rob immediately heard running water. He tried to imagine her undressing. Even though they'd been married for almost six years, Rob was still attracted to his wife. He'd heard buddies talk about the

magic dying after the first year, if not the first week after marriage. It hadn't been that way for him and Ellen. Perhaps the reason was that they hardly caught a glimpse of each other save for a couple of hours through the week. Ellen worked from eight in the morning until five, sometimes as late as six. Rob didn't get home in the mornings until eight-thirty. Usually asleep by ten or so, he woke about three in the afternoon and went to his office to work on his writing. He often kept at that until Ellen got home, then they'd prepare dinner together. After a couple of hours together, Rob would take a quick nap if there were no chores to be done around the house. By then, it was time to shower and get ready for work.

There was possibly, however, a completely different reason their sex life had never dwindled: they really loved each other.

Rob preferred to think that it wasn't their time apart that kept them interested in each other, but their true and sincere desire for one another.

He pondered all this all over again as he slid between the bed linen. He left the bedside lamp on as he listened to the water fall in the bathroom.

He wanted to wait for Ellen, but he really needed to close his eyes, just for a second and he would feel better.

His eyelids grew heavy and his eyes felt filled with harsh sand.

The angry wasps calmed.

Before he knew it he was asleep.

~ \* ~

Saturday morning dawned cloudy and remarkably cool for June. Ellen woke early, before the alarm, and moved out of bed gingerly so to not wake Rob.

She grabbed her housecoat from the hook on the door and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Downstairs, she took out a carton of eggs, a jug of milk, some flour, and bacon. Soon the kitchen was filled with the aromatic smell of a good Southern breakfast. Perhaps it was greasy and artery clogging, but Rob deserved it after all he'd been through.

She'd been a nervous wreck for the last two weeks. She still remembered the call clearly, probably wouldn't

forget it for as long as she lived. She had just lain down, the television turned to Comedy Central as she worked a Sudoku puzzle.

The phone had rung and startled her. It was the responding officer to Rob's accident. A passing motorist had called 9-1-1 and an ambulance arrived within minutes. The officer phoned from the ER room's waiting area. He wouldn't tell her Rob's condition, only that she needed to come to the hospital immediately. Did she have someone who could drive her? No, not on such short notice. She'd driven across town, her hands shaking so badly on the steering wheel that she'd almost lost control herself. It was a true blessing the rain had let up.

When she made it to the hospital, Rob was already in surgery. An "emergency procedure", they'd called it. The hands of the clock seemed frozen as she paced from one end of the lobby to the other. After a while, it occurred to her that she should call Rob's mother and father. Gary answered the phone. His voice was groggy and slurred. He'd apparently been sleeping for a while. But as soon as Ellen told him why she was calling, he'd come instantly awake and he and Rob's mother, Kathy, were pulling into the parking lot within half an hour.

It had been a long night. Ellen had no idea how long the operation was supposed to last or even what they were operating on, but if she had to wait much longer she would simply explode.

That was when Dr. Hill came out and asked for her.

"Your husband is stable," he'd said. "He sustained serious brain trauma and the tissue had begun to swell. Steps were taken to relieve the pressure against the skull."

"Can I see him?" she barely managed. Gary and Kathy were at her side.

"Not tonight, I'm afraid. He's slipped into a coma."

"Oh my God," Kathy muttered. "He's my son, Doctor. Tell me, will he be okay?"

"All I can tell you right now," the doctor said, now facing Kathy, "is that the pressure was relieved and the swelling should go down. Beyond that, we'll just have to wait and see." Ellen felt slighted by the way he'd turned his attention from her to Kathy. It wasn't that she was jealous,

but, heck, she was the man's wife, after all.

"How long, Doctor, do you expect the coma to last?" This from Gary, a former electrician retired from TVA. Though Rob didn't generally care for his father, Ellen had to admit he was a rather likeable fellow. She believed Rob's dislike of his father stemmed from more than just the alleged resentment of Rob's ambitions as a writer. Ellen thought Gary was supportive of his stepson's dreams privately, though he was much too macho to ever voice them to Rob. His job had frequently kept him away from home while Rob was growing up. Because of that, in a way at least, the two had never cemented their father-son relationship.

"There's really no way to say, Mr. Caulder." Finally, he turned back to Ellen. "There's really not much you can do tonight. It would be a good idea to go on home and get some rest."

*Like hell*, Ellen thought. She'd spent the night in the waiting area.

For the next week, she barely left Rob's bedside. They were having a screaming fit at work, but that was just too bad. Her husband meant more to her than employment. How could he not? How could anyone expect any less?

Then yesterday, they'd come home. She had to admit it was wonderful to have her husband in the bed with her again. Ellen did regret, however, that Rob had fallen asleep before she finished her shower, but she'd expected as much.

It would be a while before he recovered, regardless of what he said. One of the saddest things was that Rob hadn't so much as cracked open a book since his injury. She often joked that if he were stranded on a deserted island all he'd need is a stack of books and he'd be happy for life. To which, of course, he'd reply, "You're right, but I'd have to have you, too." It just didn't seem natural not to see him with his nose buried in a book. Usually if he wasn't reading, he was either typing at his computer in their home office or scribbling in a notebook. But he'd done none of that since he'd awakened from the coma. Ellen made a mental note to try to see if he'd like her to read a few pages from one of his books aloud to him later in the day.

Ellen was no big fan of reading. Occasionally she ruffled through a magazine or one of those nice little Chicken

Soup books. However, she would do whatever it took to make Rob feel better.

She forked the bacon out of the skillet before it got too crispy. The pancakes, though a little oblong, were golden brown. She stacked them on a plate and topped the pile off with a huge slab of butter that began to melt immediately.

She started the coffee, and then headed up to wake Rob.

~ \* ~

Robert Caulder did not wake a single time throughout the night. To say his dreams were pleasant, however, was an entirely different matter.

His sleep started peaceful enough. Random flashes projected on the big blank screen of his mind's eye. Childhood memories, portraits of long ago friends, former flames, flickered on and off, then darkness.

And the darkness began to revolve, to spin, in a maddening rotation. How he knew that the darkness moved when he could see nothing, but darkness was an enigma. He could feel the motion as if it were as real as the blood coursing through his veins.

*Death came like a thief in the night.*

The words echoed as if shouted inside a cave or across a great canyon. The voice that carried them, however, was neither harsh nor asinine. If Rob were to call the timbre of voice anything, he would call it phantomlike, even ghostlike. Though powerful, the resonance was light, almost sublime.

Then, a light appeared, far off in the distance. Even as Rob saw it, he was beginning to be pulled closer to it. It began like a twinkling star in the black canopy of night. But as he drew closer, it turned into a huge rectangular crevice of light in a shadowed landscape. While his world was still absent of light, except for that ahead of him, the light that leaked from the edges of the doorway—yes, that's what it was, he recognized it now—gave shape and form to his surroundings, a soft definition to his environment.

Rob weightlessly floated through this dark abyss toward the waiting white light. He paddled with his arms and legs as if he were swimming in a surging river, attempting to slow his unfettered inertia. But there was no stopping it. He was flying fast now, soaring like an eagle in the dead of



night.

Then, he stopped. Or was stopped. He hovered above the ground far below. His world of darkness had now become one of murk and of shadow.

He willed himself to wake. To escape this nightmare. But he could not.

Was this really a nightmare, though?

Was he in any danger?

He was really nothing more than a Peter Pan wannabe flying over, well, something dark toward a light. The light was intense and shaped like a doorway, but was there a true threat in that? Was there genuine reason for concern?

Then, there *was* genuine reason for concern.

The shadow of a man materialized in the open doorway. Nothing but an outline of a man, but his presence was intimidating, even menacing.

Had this man spoken the words that haunted him?

No, that couldn't be. This intimidating figure could not possess such a tranquil, composed voice.

Or could he?

The man held out a hand and motioned for him to move closer. Rob backpedaled with all his might. Despite his efforts, he slowly drifted toward the doorway of light, toward the shadowed stranger.

"No," Rob whispered, almost whimpering. "No! No! No!"

Hands were upon him, shaking him vigorously.

Rob opened his eyes. Ellen stood over him, staring at him with scared, wide eyes.

"Rob? Rob, darling, what's the matter?" she asked.

His eyes darted around her in a frantic attempt to see the dark man and his doorway of light. But he was in the bedroom now, safe and secure in his own bed.

He opened his mouth to speak, but fear had taken his voice.

## ***Three***

"Everything is wonderful, Ellen," Kathy Caulder said from across the table. Besides the small breakfast table that was set against a wide window in the kitchen, Rob and Ellen also had a much more formal table in the adjoining dining room. Constructed of dark, heavy walnut, the long table easily accommodated four chairs on each side as well as one on each end. Since there were only four of them, Rob and Ellen sat on one side while Rob's parents sat opposite them.

"Thank you, Mrs. Caulder."

"Yes, spaghetti is one of my favorites. You make the sauce yourself?"

"With my own two hands."

"Robert," Kathy began, "are you feeling okay?"

Rob looked up from his untouched plate. He hadn't slept at all since Ellen woke him this morning. In truth, he didn't know whether or not he would ever be able to sleep again. But that wasn't all that was bothering him. Since he'd left for college, he hadn't been especially close to his mother. In all fairness, he hadn't been all that close to her all his life.

Kathy Caulder was polite, exceedingly so. She was very social, often coordinating the heft of the activities at her church. Still, she was very reserved, and even her own son had been unable to pierce the shell that covered her true person. Growing up, it had been like living with a machine. There was no doubt that he was loved, if for no other reason than the fact that she bore him life.

But his father was a different matter altogether.

Gary was a son of a bitch. No two ways about it. That was too deep a hole to even think about right now. His self-

righteous smirk might as well have been painted on his face.

"Still having a little trouble with my head."

"Your taking your medicine as you should?"

Rob nodded.

The three of them continued to eat. Rob moved his pasta around with a fork, but couldn't bring himself to take a bite. He hadn't eaten breakfast, either. The lack of food and the pills he continued to pop had combined to spark a swirling storm in his gut. Still, the prescription painkillers couldn't fully combat his headache. A drone hummed continuously, like the buzz of a swarm of bees outside an open window.

"So, Rob, you give any more thought about coming to work for me?" his father asked. A retired electrician, he found sitting at home on the couch too boring to tolerate, so he'd taken the test for his plumbing license, passed it and ran a business part-time out of his shed. Most jobs were done for cash to keep the IRS happy and if he'd offered Rob a job once, he'd done so a dozen times.

"I'm still gonna have to pass, Dad." Rob took a sip from his glass of iced tea. "I've got a few things I'm working on and my night job gives me a chance to do that."

"Your book?" his mother asked. She may have meant it innocently enough, but to Rob's ears it sounded a tad malicious.

"Yeah."

"Look," Gary began. "I was watching CNN the other day and they were talking about books and such. They said the average person buys, at most, two books a year. Y'hear me, Robert? Two books a year. Usually they buy big names. I got to looking, the last couple of times we went to Wal-Mart, at the book section. Y'know something, they really don't sell. The same books that were there one week, was there the next. How do I know? I looked close. Dang things got dust all over 'em. Ain't like they just filled the shelves up with more copies. It's the same dang ones. If your name ain't Nora Roberts or Mary Higgins Clark, or that *Da Vinci Code* man, you'll likely die broke."

Kathy patted her husband's arm. "Let's not talk about this, honey."

"I think it's high time we did just that," Gary said.

"You call yourself a writer, Robert? Tell me, where's your book? How can a man work on something for over five years and still have nothing to show for it? To tell you the truth, I think this 'dream' you say you're pursuing is just an excuse to not get a real job and try to make something out of yourself." Then, as if he hadn't opened his mouth at all, he forked a load of noodles into his mouth.

Out of pure respect for his mother, Rob had taken the slights from his father with a grain of salt. In all that time, Rob couldn't remember one true word of encouragement. It didn't matter if it were school, athletics, or even the way Rob cut the grass. Nothing ever seemed to be good enough. Never an "atta boy," never so much as a pat on the back.

But that had been okay. Rob could deal with that. He was grown now, a man. All that was water under the bridge.

But this was his house. This was his food they were eating. He had no intention of sitting here listening to this man berate him. Not under his roof, not in front of his wife and mother.

"Dad," Rob said slowly, deliberately. He waited for the man to look up from his plate. "Get the fuck out of my house."

A gasp from his side, Ellen. A quick intake of air from across the table, his mother. The color drained out of his father's face. But it didn't remain white for long. It filled with crimson, then scarlet.

"What'd you say, boy?"

"Boy?" Rob rose from his chair. Pain, electric and hot, thundered inside his cranium. "Is that what you called me? There's the fucking door," Rob said pointing in the general direction of the front door. "Don't let it hit you on the ass on the way out."

There was more said, but Rob wasn't inclined to listen. He marched out of the dining room, never looking back.

He locked himself inside the first floor bathroom and took a seat on the toilet.

Within minutes, he heard Gary spin gravel in his Dodge Ram pickup as he peeled down the drive.

A knock at the door. "Robbie?" Ellen said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

There was nothing in the world he wanted to do less

than talk about what had just happened. In fact, he didn't want to talk about anything.

"Just give me a minute, okay?"

"Okay," Ellen answered, the resignation in her voice evident.

Her footsteps receded from the door and down the hallway. Rob placed his head in his hands. The drone was now a blare and twinkling specks of red and of white danced behind his eyelids.

*Just make it stop. Please. Just make it stop.*

He was losing it and he knew it. A head injury would take a while to heal. The doctor had told him as much. But if this was going to be his new lifestyle, at least for a while, he didn't know just how long he could bear it.

~ \* ~

It was at least two hours later when Rob finally emerged from his sanctuary. Still angry at Gary, and even more so at himself for losing his cool, he would have gladly spent the night lying on the cool tile floor if his head hadn't been crying for medication.

He cracked open the door and walked silently down the hallway. Ellen was laid out on the couch in the living room, the TV watching her as she slept.

Upstairs, he popped open the Vicodin and swallowed three pills. While he was at it, he also took the other three medications he'd been prescribed. He was getting pretty good at dry-swallowing pills.

By the time he started down the stairs, the painkillers had begun to quiet the wasps in his head. The tips of his fingers tingled and a tiny shiver worked its way up his back along his spine. Besides the lessening of the cry of his brain, these two sensations were what he most associated with the Vicodin. Not unpleasant at all. The best part, however, was the high that came over him. His lips were loose and his thoughts ran like gears in a well-oiled machine. Easy and free.

Rob peeked in at Ellen. Still snuggled on the couch, deep in dreamland, she was making those cute night sounds again. He went into the kitchen and walked over to the basement door. Down the rickety stairs was his office or his "writing room," as he liked to call it.

The cellar was unfinished for the most part and ran the entire length of the house. The far section was where Rob had chosen to place his work area. Three walls were paneled, leaving the rear of the office open to the basement.

Three large bookshelves sat against one wall, crammed to capacity with paperbacks and hardcovers alike. The last time Rob had taken an inventory, which he tried to do at least once a year in order to avoid double-purchasing books, either new or second hand from the used bookstore downtown or from eBay or Amazon, he'd counted six hundred and thirty two volumes. What couldn't be packed on the shelves sat in towering plies in front of and to either side of the shelving.

The opposing wall was bare. Darkly paneled, it had plenty of room for more shelves, framed photos or even a row of filing cabinets. However, Rob had plans for this wall. This was where he was going to hang the framed art for all his future novels. The cover art would be arranged tastefully and ornately along the wall in expensive frames. In his mind's eye he saw ten or so different frames holding the front covers of books to come. While he couldn't necessarily make out the artwork or even the titles, he was confident that the space would be filled. Or at least he had been. Lately, he wasn't too confident about anything.

An ivory area rug covered the floor. Threadbare and unraveling, the carpet had been in the master bedroom when they'd moved in. Rob soon learned the concrete floor was cold in the winter so he'd brought the rug down, where it had remained ever since.

Against the exterior wall of the basement were his desk, computer, printer, and various other hardware devices. The desk was a cheap pressboard piece that looked quite in place in the ancient cellar. Just as long as it stood on its legs, Rob was happy with it. Bought in a used furniture store in Oxford, it had languished in storage after he'd left college until he and Ellen moved to the farmhouse.

The computer was a three-year-old Dell desktop. Ellen had placed it under the tree early on a Christmas morning and, until now, the aging PC was one of his most prized possessions. The software needed to be updated and he was still on a dial-up Internet access, but he could still create a

document and save it either to a disk or to the hard drive and that's all he had ever wanted it for.

A small telephone stand stood next to the desk. There was no telephone line downstairs and even if there was, Rob would never have considered installing a phone in his writing room. In lieu of a telephone, paper was stacked on the wooden top, a fist-sized chunk of quartz held the unbound papers in place.

The Great American Novel.

*My ass.*

Rob moved over to his unfinished manuscript.

About seventy-five pages of double-spaced, twelve-point type were all that showed for years of frustrating hours spent at the keyboard. Not that he hadn't made a valiant effort. After more than two dozen false starts and several major overhauls, he was finally happy with the few complete chapters. Still, there was no end in sight for *A Promise Kept*.

He imagined the novel one day being compared to *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, or maybe even *As I Lay Dying*. It was a nice fantasy. But it wouldn't be compared to anything if it was never finished.

A tale set in the Deep South, *A Promise Kept* was the story of two young men, brothers actually, who grow into adulthood in a small town modeled after Ivy Springs. The two brothers, Jack and Ryan, are only two years apart in age, Jack the oldest. Despite their proximity in age, the two brothers are as different as daylight and darkness. One chooses the high and narrow and the other, well, chose the temptations of crime and easy money. The only thing that keeps these two brothers together is the promise they made to their dying mother: that they would never raise a hand against each other. A simple enough vow, but when Jack becomes the local chief of police and Ryan the town's largest crime boss, the promise becomes increasingly harder to keep.

Rob thought it was a good plot with plenty of room for some great characterization.

But for the life of him, he couldn't remember the last thing he'd written. That bothered him. Usually, the current scene stayed with him long after the Dell was shut down. Now, however, even after a moment of thought, he couldn't

recall where he'd stopped.

Rob pulled out the squeaky office chair and took a seat. He punched the power button and waited for the system to boot up. The Windows theme chimed and his desktop icons flared to life over the wallpaper of one of he and Ellen's wedding photographs. He double-clicked the icon labeled APK and waited for the Word document to open.

A stab of pain shot through him, from one temple to the other. Rob clamped his hands to his head at the abrupt and ferocious attack.

When it subsided, the characters on the screen were dancing, moving almost like ants on bare earth.

*Death came like a thief in the night.*

Those words again. Eight simple words that had become almost a plague to him. Rob had no idea what they were supposed to mean or where they even had come from. But he knew he couldn't escape them. He could think of only one way to free them, to dig them from his conscious mind.

He closed out of his current document and opened a blank word document. Ordinarily, the blank whiteness of a new document was supremely intimidating to Rob. But not this time. Right now he could hardly wait for the system to catch up and the cursor to start to blink.

His fingers flew over the keyboard. He typed: *Death came like a thief in the night.* And the words were gone from his head, freed, given life on the computer.

But it didn't stop there. His fingers continued to move over the black keys of the Dell keyboard. Clicking and ticking in some unknown rhythm. First, Rob watched his hands as they typed, then looked at the keyboard. It was an odd concept to grasp. He had no idea what he was typing; only that he had some inner, strange urge to type. He half expected gibberish to flash across the screen, but what began to build, one word at a time, was anything but gibberish.

*Death came like a thief in the night. It was a fine mist that rolled over the darkened countryside, enveloping, devouring everything in its path.*

Still he typed.

Paragraph after paragraph appeared mysteriously on the screen. The paragraphs topped upon one another until



they pushed over to a new page. Rob's fingers continued to move, never slowing. If anything, they gained more momentum.

It took him a little while of watching the characters multiply on the screen to realize what was really happening. He had to really think about it.

He was *writing*. Really and truly writing.

There was no mistaking that a story was coming to life before his very eyes. What kind of story, its origination, or its eventual culmination, were unknown to Rob, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that the words were flashing onto his monitor almost as fast as he could read them.

It was a true high. Not a narcotic fix, but a true, almost miraculous, feeling.

And he had to admit, the story was looking pretty damned good.

~ \* ~

Ellen Caulder opened her eyes to a talking head on the TV screen reporting the ten o'clock news. A local school was being condemned and parents were being advised to take the necessary steps to ensure their children did not take the opportunity to explore its depths before it could be torn down.

Ellen's neck was stiff from the way she'd been laying and her mouth tasted like garlic and onion from last night's spaghetti. She sat up and stretched her arms, stifling a yawn in the process. She hadn't meant to fall asleep. She'd lain on the couch only to wait for Rob to come out of the bathroom. The blanket they kept folded up on the back of the couch had been too hard to resist and she decided there would be nothing wrong with getting comfortable while she waited.

That had been what, two, three hours ago?

She stood up and shook the lingering sleep away. The bathroom door was open and she could see Rob was no longer in there. She started to head upstairs but stopped in the dining room to put tonight's dinner away.

As she placed a large plate in the fridge, she saw that the cellar door was ajar and a light shone through the opening. Ellen opened the door a little further and stuck her head in. She heard the faint click of tapping keys.

She considered going down to check on him, but the sound was like music to her ears. There were very few things her husband had ever asked of her. He was not a demanding man, nor a jealous one. He always helped with his share of the chores and never once raised his voice in anger to her.

All he ever wanted in return was her love and the opportunity to follow his dream—to write.

Ellen didn't understand his compulsion to be a writer. Besides her garden, there were very few things she felt compelled to do in life. She strived to be a good wife and she wanted to be a mother someday.

They'd talked about children long before they ever married. She knew they could barely afford to feed themselves, much less a child. Truth is, without her income, they would quickly enter the lower realms of poverty. Rob had always said that as soon as his first novel sold, they'd begin a family. When he'd first dropped out of college, it seemed like it just might happen. He'd written on a schedule and, for a while, everything seemed to be coming together. Then, for some reason or another, he'd scrapped all his work and started over. He didn't talk about it much, not until he was too frustrated to keep it bottled inside.

Ellen kept encouraging him. It meant so very much to him.

But they weren't getting any younger. Both were twenty-eight, Ellen's birthday this coming December, Rob's next March. She was certainly aware of the health risks involved in a thirty-something pregnancy, both for her and the child.

So every day, every single day, she hoped against hope, that Rob would find a way to commit the novel he so desperately wanted to paper. If not, she hoped he would move on with his life and just find joy in reading the works of others. Then, hopefully, decide it was time to bring a baby into the house.

Even if she didn't support his ambition, Ellen knew that to raise objection would be to spurn in her husband the same feelings that he had for his stepfather. If she hadn't been present at supper tonight, Ellen would never have believed Rob would have spoken that way in front of Kathy. As a matter of fact, she'd never heard Rob speak that way to

anyone. He'd never been fond of Gary; that was no secret. He'd told her as much. But to think he'd have snapped just like that, well, it was just weird. But, in all fairness, Rob had been through a lot. Hell, he'd almost died.

Ellen didn't want to think about that. She dreaded imagining a life without her husband.

From the kitchen, she headed upstairs. She'd showered before preparing dinner and didn't feel up to another. Going to bed by herself was nothing new to her. With Rob's crazy work schedule, they hardly ever got the chance to lie down together. Plus, knowing that he was in the basement doing one of the things he loved best gave her comfort.

He was healing. Pretty soon he'd be his old self again.

## ***Four***

Robert Caulder had never felt like this before in his life. When he was finally able to quell the compulsion to type, he had forty pages of single-spaced type. Never in his life had he produced so much in one sitting. Before now, he didn't think such a feat was possible.

He looked to the bottom right of his screen and saw that it was way past midnight. He had no idea what time it had been when he'd first come down to the cellar, but the fact that it was so late—or was it early?—was just crazy.

Forty pages.

Single-spaced pages.

Over fifteen thousand words.

It would take him the better part of two weeks to complete that much under normal circumstances. He scrolled back to the beginning of the document and began to read. After finishing the first page, he noticed there hadn't been one single error. Not in spelling. Not in grammar. Not in syntax. A few of the sentences were fragments but in fiction such things were permissible.

But from the ominous opening sentence, he knew this was much different than anything he'd ever written or attempted to write before. Not only the words, but the inherent voice of the story was also unlike any of his previous writing.

All in all, there were three finished chapters. He read them all. When he finished, he looked over his shoulder. There were bare bulbs suspended from the ceiling throughout the cellar which, at the moment, all were aglow. Still, there were deep shadows. The gloom of the

subterranean room never bothered him before, never really even occurred to him. He peered into the inky corners of the basement. Suddenly, the silence was a tangible thing, almost threatening in its absolute command of the space.

Rob swallowed and flicked on the small lamp to the right of the computer monitor. The seventy-five watt bulb did little to vanquish the darkness that seemed to rolling toward him. In fact, the darkness seemed to be coming like *a thief in the night*.

Absurd.

Rob looked back at the screen and tried to concentrate on the story that had materialized as if by magic. He had written every single word. At least physically. But he had no notion of the words he'd typed, before or after they popped into existence. Thinking back, he couldn't recall knowing when to go from one key to the other, whether it was a letter, punctuation mark, or even the tap of the space bar.

As a writer, Rob knew he should be able to articulate the sense of awe that filled him from looking at his night's accomplishment. But he was unable to do so. Then again, he wasn't much of a writer. His father was right. It was hard to believe that after five years of work, he had nothing to show for it but a miniscule pile of paper.

But tonight he'd written forty pages.

Three fucking chapters.

With no effort on his part.

He felt drained, even weakened from the experience, but exhilarated as well.

The chapters he read were good, hell, great. While the story itself was strange, bordering on spooky, it was top quality. Almost as if a true writer penned the words. But not just any writer. Rob had been engaged from the opening sentence and felt a sting of disappointment when the third chapter ended. A huge letdown and a real need to read more.

Again, it was unlike anything he'd ever written or even read before. Rob's preference tended more to the literary and general. The story in front of him was something completely different. Something darker, more insidious.

A horror story.

Rob snickered.

Horror.

Vampires and werewolves and mummies and such. Selling your soul to Satan himself. Zombies coming from the grave and munching on the brains of the living. Supernatural mumbo jumbo.

Dreck.

Pure garbage.

Rob couldn't stand the crap. Couldn't even sit still in front of the TV for a scary movie. It was low brow entertainment for low brow individuals. For people with little imagination and no ability to see the world for what it truly was. There were enough true horrors in the world without having to think them up. Serial killers, AIDS, anthrax, terrorism, child abuse, poverty. Those were real horrors.

Sure, some horror fiction probably existed without the supernatural element, but even then, was it any better? Poe's *Tell-tale Heart* was one example. Rob had to read it in high school English. A study of guilt and paranoia. Decent story. But ultimately, it had been completely unappealing to him.

There might be a market for such crap, but who wanted to be known as a horror writer? Such a reputation was akin to being known as the neighborhood flasher, Rob reasoned.

But he had written three chapters in one sitting. Three pretty damn good chapters. Whether they were the start of a true horror tale or not, it was the best work he'd ever done. Period.

He did some quick math in his head. Forty pages. Three chapters. Fifteen thousand words. The average paperback was between ninety and one hundred thousand words. Anywhere from three hundred and twenty pages to three hundred and eighty.

If he could write this much every day he could have a book in less than a week.

*Unfuckingbelievable!*

That would be the first draft, true enough. However, if the rest of the book was as clean as these first chapters, little editing would be needed. And since he didn't even know what the hell he was writing until it was written, there would be no way to anticipate any heavy revision.

Was it possible? Could he have stumbled onto something?

Rob felt faint.

His body felt like it had been pulled through a wringer.

His mind felt like an empty well, the simplest thoughts beyond him. He needed sleep and needed it now. He made sure to save his work onto the hard drive, giving it the title, *Untitled*. He made a second copy onto CD-ROM. He would have printed the document as well, but was low on ink, so decided against it. When that was done, he shut down the computer and stood up. Then he realized something else.

For the first time in a week his head didn't hurt.

~ \* ~

The next morning dawned warm and bright. When Rob woke, he smelled the wonderful aromas of a home cooked breakfast. Out of bed, he felt energized as he walked across the floor. He took a quick hot shower before dressing and heading downstairs.

There was no discomfort anywhere in his body, his head included.

"Good morning," Ellen said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Morning," he answered and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Well, well. You certainly look like you're feeling better."

Rob poured coffee into a mug. "You have no idea." He took a careful sip of the strong, fragrant java. "Actually, I feel great."

"Glad to hear it. I've got bacon, eggs, toast, and sausage links."

"Mmmm, sounds delicious. You been up long?"

"About half an hour. You?"

"Just long enough to take a shower." He took a seat at the table while Ellen placed bread into the toaster. Sunlight, bright and delightful, shone through the window over the sink and through the large window on the opposite side of the table.

"I heard you typing last night, didn't I?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess so." Rob wasn't sure why the comment caught him off guard. He remembered now that

before he'd gone to the basement, Ellen had been napping on the couch. But she was in the bed when he'd turned in after midnight. Apparently she'd seen the cellar door ajar. That wasn't a big deal, was it? It shouldn't be. Somehow, though, he thought it just might turn into one. Just in case last night had been some freak accident and he was never able to replicate such enormous output again, he thought it would be better left as a secret.

But why did he have the vague sense of guilt? He'd done nothing wrong. He was a writer and he'd been writing. It wasn't like he'd snuck out of the house and went barhopping for an easy lay.

"Yeah," Rob said again. "I felt like working a little."

"How'd it go?"

Rob cleared his throat. "Pretty good. Hey, you get the paper yet?"

"No," she answered. Fortunately, she didn't seem to be picking up on his nervousness.

"I think I'll run get it."

"You sure? That's a long walk. Take the car, why don't you?"

"Naw, it'll do me good to stretch my legs."

Ellen left the counter and moved over to him. She looked good on this glorious Sunday morning. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, something she rarely did. She wore a white Hard Rock Café tee shirt and gray cotton shorts. The shorts were very short and the slight curve of her ample ass cheeks was visible. Fine and firm. She looked more like a freshman coed than a woman five years married.

"Okay, but hurry back before breakfast gets cold."

"Sure thing."

At the front door, Rob paused long enough to slip a pair of flip-flops on his feet, then was outside. The birds sang and the dew on the lawn was drying fast in the rising summer heat. The gravel crunched underfoot and in the distance, a dog barked. It was altogether a picture perfect day. But Rob wasn't thinking about that.

He could think of nothing but the miracle of last night. He considered it nothing less. Perhaps filling page after page with impeccable prose wasn't in the same league as parting



the Red Sea or bringing Lazarus back from the dead, but to Rob it was a true miracle.

Could he do it again?

He flinched at the familiar ghost of self-doubt that had plagued him his whole life.

What if last night truly had been a one-time occurrence? What if it was a misfiring of brain synapses or something physiological that unlocked a portal into literary genius? And worse, what if that portal had sealed shut again?

He had to find out. There was nothing else he could do. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but, as the saying goes, satisfaction brought it back.

The driveway had never seemed so long. He was winded by the time he made it to the road. On a post hung both the mailbox and the newspaper box. Rob pulled the Sunday edition of the local paper, the *Ivy Springs Gazette*, out of its hole and clutched it up under his arm without taking even a glance at it.

He turned and headed back to the house at a much faster clip than before. He'd have a nice breakfast with his wife. Talk for a while, browse through the paper, and then head downstairs to see if lightning did, in fact, strike twice.

He wondered if he could handle the suspense.

~ \* ~

Rob took the stairs slowly down into the basement. Ellen decided to work for a while outdoors, weeding her flowerbeds. It was close to noon and the first opportunity Rob had to sit down at the computer.

He waited more patiently than he thought possible for the Dell to boot up. A flicker of keypunches would pull up last night's document, he hoped.

During breakfast, he had the silly idea that maybe everything that happened last night had been a dream. The more he thought about it, he realized that might not be so silly. He'd taken more than the prescribed dose of Vicodin and his mind had been a little fuzzy. It could have easily been a dream.

He really wasn't in a big hurry to find out.

He'd helped Ellen with the dishes after they'd finished breakfast.

There was no sentence stuck in his head like before, no phrase. He had no idea how the fourth chapter would begin. For all intents and purposes, he was clueless.

The untitled document came up just as it should. Everything was just as he wanted it to be. Forty pages filled with wonderfully crisp and evocative, albeit sinister, prose.

But now came the moment of truth. He went to the end of the third chapter and inserted a page break. Twelve lines down, he typed, *Chapter Four*. Then he skipped three lines and stopped.

The cursor blinked slowly, teasingly. Even though he knew better, Rob felt like the little blinking mark was taunting him. Then again, in light of everything else, maybe he didn't know any better.

His hands hovered over the keyboard, fingertips slightly above the home keys. Rob had done well in his ninth grade typing class. The home key position was one of the few things he could still recall.

He waited for something to happen.

It never did.

Time swelled and threatened to burst.

Every hope he'd built since last night now came crashing down like a house of cards. He'd suspected his newfound ability was too good to be true. The blankness of the snow white screen was a terrifying thing. It caused an uncontrollable anxiety that rose from all his insecurities in the world. All morning long he had dared to believe that he would write a novel. A great novel. That he would sell it and all the shit he'd taken from his old man, all the sad smiles from Ellen when he said he would be a full-time successful writer someday, would pay off. That the hours spent toiling in this dark, dank-smelling shithole would be justified and he would be vindicated. Even though the illusion had been constructed and in his mind for less than twenty four hours, it had become a reality for him and now, when nothing came, no beginning to the next chapter, he became angry.

Rob balled his hands into fists and crashed them into his desk. *God damn it!*

He'd been so close, so very close, and now he was back to square one.

Well, maybe he could do it on his own. Maybe he just

needed a spark, some catalyst to set him into motion.

Rob placed his fingers over the keyboard again. He was about to type the word “the” to begin a sentence, but that didn’t happen. Instead:

*Cold surgical steel sliced into the flesh of her neck as if it were warm butter, parting the throat into two distinct folds. Blood, hot and dark, flowed like a mighty river.*

Stunned, Rob watched as the words moved across the screen. Invigoration rushed through him. His fingers continued typing, faster and faster. Words, sentences, and paragraphs formed and all he had to do was hang on for the ride.

Automatic writing, that’s what it was. Just like a channeling at a séance. Cryptic messages from beyond forced through him and out onto the computer screen.

*Ghost writing*, he liked that. He was ghost writing.

A horror writer for less than a day and he was already embracing the supernatural.

Again, he lost himself in the unfolding story. It wasn’t all that different from reading, really. The words popped up just fast enough for him to read at a normal pace. The narrative was getting darker, bloodier. Some scenes were obscene, others chilling, some heartfelt.

The writing was superb; he would say that. But the story itself was compelling in its own right. Naturally, it would have to be.

Even with strong writing, a story could fail because it was simply no good. The characters could be cardboard and the descriptions similar to technical manuals. It was hard to know what to put in and what to leave out. Was it important to know that the wind blew from the north or the south? Adverbs, a true addiction of Rob’s, could ruin, instead of enhance, an otherwise strong dialogue exchange.

These details and many others had always been serious concerns for Rob. All the creative writing classes, books, and advice in the world could only take you so far. Like with everything else in life, you had to find your own way. In writing there was not only voice and style, but tone and structure as well. A narrative meant to be exciting or moving could fall flat without the proper rhythm.

But now, none of that mattered.

Perfect lines fluttered across the screen and came to life as only the very best could manage.

Rob never heard Ellen open the door and make her way down the steps. He never knew she was behind him until she tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped in alarm.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

He moved his hands away from the keyboard and placed them in his lap to avoid the temptation to continue. He swiveled around in his chair to face her. She had dirt smeared across her forehead and cheeks. She still even had her thin gardening gloves on. "That's okay, honey. I was just really into this scene."

"Still going well?"

"It really is. I guess that two week break really helped. Gave me a new prospective, maybe."

"You know you've been down here almost four hours?"

"Really?" he asked, genuinely surprised.

Ellen moved closer, then closer still, her hips swaying slightly, seductively. "Don't you think its time for a break?" The significance of her sly smile was not lost on Rob.

Ellen slid an arm around his neck; the other began to stroke his chest. Their lips met and she tasted sweet and wonderful. She pressed harder into him and sat down in his lap. Their tongues touched, flickering together, then apart.

It had been a while since he and Ellen had slept together and he could feel his body responding to their affection. She took one of his hands and guided it between her thighs.

Ellen began to breathe hard as she slipped his hand into her shorts.

But making love was not Rob's priority at the moment. He couldn't think of anything but getting back to work on his book.

Four hours, she'd said. How much had he accomplished in that time? The words had come nonstop, so there was really no telling without doing a word count.

"Look," Rob said freeing his mouth from his wife's. "I need to finish this chapter. Do you think we might be able to finish this later?"

"Huh?" Ellen looked stricken. As well she should. In all their years together, neither had ever turned down the

other's advances. No matter what. "You're serious?"

"Yeah. Hey, don't get mad. But I'm really hot right now. If I stop, I might not be able to get back into it."

Something cold flashed across Ellen's eyes. "Sure. No problem. Just give me a holler when you're ready to act like a husband." She stood, turned, and was gone.

A voice deep down told Rob that he should call out for her, stop her, go after her. But that voice was lost to the one calling him back to the computer. A strong urge compelled him to finish what he'd started.

So, he did.

## ***Five***

The next week flew by. While Rob was at home all day every day, Ellen returned to work on Monday. To make up for the time that she'd missed while he'd been in the hospital, she worked two hours overtime each day. She went in and did paperwork an hour before opening and stayed doing the same after the loan office closed.

Rob barely knew it. In fact, they saw less of each other than when Rob had been working. He began taking his meals in the cellar, when he thought to eat at all. But the manuscript was gaining weight, a term he used whenever his page count passed one hundred pages. A rare occurrence.

He averaged ten to fifteen thousand words, forty or so pages a day, all week long. As soon as he finished, he went upstairs and passed out across the bed. When he woke in the morning, he made a pot of coffee, grabbed a Pop Tart or cereal bar, and headed down to the cellar.

Ellen commented several times about his obsessive behavior. He grunted insincere apologies and did his best to ignore her when possible.

The manuscript was taking form, becoming a novel, a true book. But more than that. It was as if it were...taking on a life of its own.

Rob had become nothing more than a tool that brought the work into creation. Like a pencil or paper, just another medium.

He still read as he typed. He was as hooked on the tale as he'd ever been on anything he'd ever read, seen, or heard. Whether the mystical method into which the narrative came to life colored his perspective or not, the result was

the same.

Rob was enthralled.

Finally, at four o'clock in the evening on Friday, less than a week after he'd first begun, the book was complete. Not the first draft, not a rough version. The actual book. Error free, as far as he could tell. Ninety thousand words of the most disturbing prose he'd ever read.

It wasn't hard to imagine blood dripping from the screen in several sections of the book.

Still, he wasn't finished. A few things he had to do on his own. The format of the document had to be changed. He justified the text and inserted one inch margins all around. The single-spacing was changed to double and he needed a title page. That stopped him dead in his tracks. Despite all the time spent at this desk, he had no idea what the name of this work was or should be.

But he had a solution for that as well.

He moved all the text from the first page to the second, creating a blank opening page. In the top right corner he typed:

*Approximate Word Count: 90,100*

In the bottom left corner he typed his name and contact info. Then he centered the cursor and waited, taking his fingers from the keys. Rob took a deep breath. *Come on baby, work your magic.* He put his fingers back down and automatically...

*The Killing Field*

*By*

*Robert Caulder*

...appeared across the screen as his fingers blurred.

*The Killing Field*, Rob thought. Sounded good, sounded real good. And the byline looked pretty fucking fabulous, as well. It wasn't the first time he'd created a title page, far from it. But it was the first time ever that his name had been affixed to a finished work.

It was thrilling and intoxicating.

He saved the document to the hard drive and two CDs under the new title.

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. Whatever mystical power had delivered this book into his hands had finished its part of the deal. Now, it

was his turn to hold up his.

~ \* ~

That weekend, Rob took time to be with Ellen. She acted cold towards him when she first arrived home that Friday evening, but his constant attention and sincere compliments finally began to thaw her.

Friday night they watched TV together and Rob prepared a late supper for them both. Baked fish and fettuccine. Though not big drinkers, both enjoyed the occasional glass of wine and kept a small supply in the pantry.

Sipping a moderately priced merlot, they talked over their finished meals. Rob was on his fourth glass, Ellen on her third.

"I'm sorry I've been so busy this week. I know we haven't seen much of each other, but I promise it won't be like that again."

Ellen sipped from her glass. "I know you were excited about working on your book, baby. Believe me, I understand that. But I was afraid you were pushing too hard. Becoming obsessive, even. I mean, you write all day long and all afternoon and way into the night. That can't be healthy. All those hours in front of a monitor has to be hard on your eyes. Are you still having those severe headaches?"

Rob hadn't mentioned that his head no longer bothered him. Since he began working on the book, he'd been pain-free. Yet, he was still reluctant to share this with his wife. After all, he was still gobbling up the painkillers like they were candy. It was a good thing he had an appointment with Dr. Hill in another week. Somehow he'd have to convince the man he needed to continue taking something for pain. The doctor would probably want to downgrade the prescription to something less powerful. If, however, he played his cards right, he might get a fresh prescription for his beloved Vicodin. As it was, he'd have to ration them out to make it until his appointment. That didn't bother him too much. As long as he could take one or two a day, he'd make it just fine.

"Yeah. From time to time. When it gets too bad, I take a break from writing."

"Don't you think you should take your mind off writing



for a while? At least for the weekend?"

"Really?" Rob grinned. "You think you might be able to help me do that?"

"Maybe," she said. "Just maybe."

Rob stood from his chair and walked slowly over to his wife. "I have an idea."

"What's that?" She had that giggly voice that only shone through when she'd had just a tad too much to drink.

"Why don't we go upstairs, turn off all the lights, pull back the sheets, and try to lose ourselves in each other? Get inexplicably, irrevocably lost."

"Sounds good, but do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Not like this," Rob responded. He bent low and took Ellen's chin in one hand and tilted her face up to him. At first, the contact was light. He could taste the deep, dark wine on her lips, then her breath. With his free hand, he ran fingers through her hair, then down her back. She trembled slightly.

After a moment, she asked, "What are we waiting for?"

~ \* ~

When Saturday rolled around, Rob had had enough of staying at home. The last time he'd been off the property was for the ride home from the hospital. Before cabin fever completely devoured him, he suggested to Ellen that they take a little road trip. After packing some canned drinks and food items into a small cooler and filling it with ice, they pulled out of the drive.

Two hours later, they lounged at a picnic table overlooking a large, sparkling lake at J.P. Coleman State Park. They'd stopped at a station and bought charcoal and starter fluid and Rob already had several hamburger patties sizzling on the iron grill only feet away from the table.

Ellen had laid out a spread on the tabletop. Chips and dip, pickles, snack cakes, and icy Cokes. The weather was fine and a soft breeze rolled in from across the water. There were several people scattered around the picnic area but not such a crowd to prevent them from enjoying themselves. Down by the shore, two young boys tossed a Frisbee back and forth and a yellow Labrador barked as it ran to and fro

between them.

"Make sure mine is well-done."

Rob dribbled marinating sauce over the darkening patties and inhaled the rising smoke. "Your wish is my command."

"As long as it's taking, those should be some prize winning burgers."

"So good you'll slap yourself."

A few minutes later, Rob sat next to his wife waiting for her to take a bite before he dug into his double cheeseburger.

"It would be nice if we could do this more often," Ellen said as she grabbed a handful of chips and set them on her plate.

"Just wait until I sell my book. Nothing but easy living for us after that."

"I thought we agreed not to discuss writing, just for this weekend."

Rob took another bite before responding. "We're not talking about writing, Elle. We're talking about getting rich."

"Fair enough. There is this new SUV down at the dealership I've been looking at."

"No problem, we'll need it to get to our cabin."

"What cabin?"

"The one we're going to buy up in Aspen or somewhere like that. A real rustic place with stone fireplace and a bear skin rug."

"That sounds okay, but I think I'd rather have a house on the beach."

"Hell," Rob said. "Why not both?"

"I could finally open that flower shop I've always wanted."

"A flower shop? The reason for all the money is that we wouldn't have to work."

"Being a florist wouldn't be like real work. At least not to me."

"We'll buy you a chain of floral shops and the biggest house in town."

"I think I'd like to keep Grandma's house. It feels like home."

"Okay, but we'll remodel. I'll finish the basement and

make a real office out of it. Hardwood floors, a wet bar, a big hulking mahogany desk with a flat panel monitor and a computer that could do everything but change the tires on your SUV."

"And we could have a baby."

"Yeah," Rob said, dragging the word out a little too long.

"What's wrong? That's what we've always said, isn't it?"

"Of course, baby." She was right. When they'd first gotten married, Ellen had been close to obsessed about them having children. Rob had told her over and over again that they just didn't have the money. To finally get her off the subject, he'd pledged that as soon as he sold his first novel, they would start a family. The pledge was beneficial in two ways. First, it had made Ellen happy enough that she hadn't really pressed the issue anymore. Secondly, she really began encouraging him as he tried to write. She didn't know that he now had a finished project sitting on his computer. Of course, he was a long way from having it published or even selling it. Hell, he was the only person that even knew about it. Nonetheless, the thought of it brought a cold sliver of chill to him.

He had lied about not having the money for children. Well, maybe not lied, exactly. For all intents and purposes, the Caulders were pretty close to broke. But that hadn't been the sole, or even the main reason, for his hesitance about having offspring.

Rob was terrified he would be an awful father.

After all, the only things he knew about raising a child he'd learned from his father. And that, even objectively, had not been a good lesson. Gary Caulder was not an abusive father or even all that mean. But he was cold, and had always been distant from his son. In a way, that had been just as abusive as corporeal punishment. There were psychological studies that stated cycles exist between father and son. That if you were raised by a bad father, you would become a bad father. There were instances when such a cycle was broken, but they were the exception.

Rob would choose not to be father over being a bad one any day. His mother's religious convictions hadn't been

transferred to him, but he still knew that a man had a moral obligation to do right by his son or daughter. Intent meant little. The end result was all that mattered.

"We could easily turn the extra bedroom into a nursery."

Deciding that going along with Ellen would be better than starting an argument, Rob said, "Yeah. That'd be good. It's right next to ours. We could store the furniture in the basement, slap a few coats of paint on the wall and it'd look great."

"I'd like a glider cradle. I think they're safer than the rocking type. In case the baby tries to stand up, it would be less likely to tip over. And I could probably find some material down at Hankins to make the bedding and drapes on Grandma's old Singer."

"Wow, you've really been thinking about this."

"Of course I have, Robbie. Just think, the baby, it would be ours. Yours and mine, no one else's. Someone to call me Mommy, and you, Daddy. I don't care if it's a boy or girl; I'll love it like there's no tomorrow."

"I think I'd like a boy. I could teach him how to throw a baseball."

"What, a girl can't pitch a ball?"

"Yeah, but have you ever seen one in the major leagues?"

"You might have a daughter that becomes a doctor and cures cancer, or maybe a lawyer who sees that justice is carried out."

"In that case, I'll need to get a shotgun."

"Why?" Ellen laughed.

"For all those creeps that come around trying to date Daddy's little girl. Not to shoot 'em. Just to scare 'em. Unless, of course, my finger slips."

"You're not going to be that type, are you?"

"Oh yeah. I don't know about you, but I remember how I was as a teenager, and the times have changed a lot since then."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that if we do have a daughter, she'll be lucky to date before she's thirty."

"Oh, Robbie, you're just running your mouth."

"No. I'm serious." Ellen said nothing for a moment, only laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I can see you now. It doesn't matter if it's a boy or girl, you'll be wrapped around your child's finger like a string."

"You really think so?" Finished with his hamburger, he collected both their plates and dropped them in the trashcan.

"I have no doubt."

"And what about you?" He reached for his Coke and took a sip.

"What about me?"

"When that child says jump, you'll ask how high."

"I think you know me better than that." She reached over and gave him a playful pinch.

"Oh I do, I do." He was grinning. Actually, talking about children was fun, even if the prospect of actually having a few was terrifying.

"I'll be right back," Rob told her.

"Where you heading?"

"Nature calls."

"Make sure you use a toilet, I think it's a crime to water the trees in a state park."

"Funny, funny."

It took Rob only a few minutes to get to the cinderblock building that housed the restrooms. His shoes squeaked across the nasty floor as he stepped into a stall. He pulled a Vicodin from his pants pocket and swallowed it.

Fifteen minutes, that's all it would take and everything would be fine with the world.

## ***Six***

The Golden Svagli was not the premiere, fine dining establishment its owners hoped it would be. It was too far down Fifth Avenue and its clientele did not consist of the Who's Who in New York City. Although its prices, which were not published in the snazzy little menus by the way, would make one think they were dining at the most exclusive club in Manhattan.

Danielle Greer forked a sliver of iceberg lettuce and popped it into her mouth, careful not to smear her lipstick. It was a little after one and the lunch crowd was dwindling down. Pretty soon, there would be no one left but Danielle, her dining partner, and the restaurant's staff.

And being alone with Randall B. Paulson was not something she'd like to endure.

Dressed in a tailored navy suit, silk tie and an impeccable comb-over which made him look like a prime candidate for the Hair Club for Men, he looked more like an aging stockbroker than an editor for a moderately-sized New York publishing house. But that's exactly what he was. It had been almost impossible to score a meeting with Paulson. Even though he was quite low in the echelon of his house, he was still someone to be reckoned with. His bosses thought a lot of his opinion, so if he wanted a book, most likely the house would acquire the book. Danielle had been careful to do her homework on the man before even approaching him. He'd been with Jonathon Macy Publishers for a decade and a half after leaving a failed startup attempt in the mid-eighties. While he wasn't especially adept at running a business, his eye for spotting talent and implementing successful

marketing techniques were beyond reproach.

He'd acquired no less than twenty-five best-selling works of both fiction and nonfiction for his company. The fact that all of these had only done well on the paperback lists did not diminish his reputation. Selling books had never been an easy business. In an age where computers, cell phones and PDAs were all the rage, the idea of reading anything more than the instruction manual for such a device was, at least to the mainstream, dated.

It was a sad time to be a literary agent, but it was an even worse time to be an *independent* literary agent. Danielle's double degree from Columbia in both English and Journalism had been a stepping stone to internships at both Random House and Little, Brown Company, working in the editorial departments.

After graduation, she'd been offered and accepted an entry level position with the William Morris Agency. Though she had high hopes and the talent to go with it—at least in her opinion—it had taken her over a year to be recognized as anything more than a secretary. Finally, she'd gotten the break she'd been dreaming of. She was promoted to associate agent to Stewart Baxter, a man famous in the industry for cementing lucrative contracts for his clients. Baxter had taken to Danielle almost immediately and she'd learned a lot from him.

While at William Morris, she dreamed of opening her own agency. As silly as it might sound, she loved the ideals of her profession, of bringing quality writing to public attention. She may never find her Dan Brown or her J.K. Rowling, maybe not even her Fern Michaels or Faye Kellerman, but if she could cultivate enough competent clients to keep her head above water and, God willing, actually make a profit, she would call her new venture a success.

As of now, however, she had yet to make a sale. That's where she hoped Paulson would come into play. Her client roster was small, only one author as a matter of fact, Benjamin Houston, an unpublished writer. She'd been quite selective in agreeing to represent him. A few ads in writer's markets and literary publications and Danielle had been swamped with slush, the term for unsolicited proposals as

well as partial and complete manuscripts. While open to every genre, from literary to sword and sorcery, to fantasy and everything in between, she knew from experience that two styles sold less than anything else, horror and mystery. While mystery had a huge following, the market was currently saturated. Science fiction and fantasy sold well enough, as did suspense. Romance, however, was the fastest moving category, whether historical, paranormal, or contemporary. Horror only sold if your name was Stephen King or John Saul.

Houston's script could easily enough be classified as contemporary romance and Danielle couldn't help comparing *Redemption* to the earlier works of Nicholas Sparks. Since Sparks' debut novel, *The Notebook*, sold for a cool million, Danielle decided to pitch Houston's manuscript to Paulson.

Houston wasn't completely unknown. His short stories had appeared in several respectable magazines. He'd joined the Romance Writers of America organization over a year ago. She hoped the strength of the novel and these credentials would interest Paulson.

"So, have you made a decision on the manuscript?" she asked as Paulson spooned soup that looked completely unappetizing, but probably cost as much as her weekly grocery bill, into his mouth.

He didn't answer immediately, but used a cloth napkin to wipe his mouth and took a sip of his gin and tonic. "I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, Danielle. It is all right if I call you Danielle, isn't it?"

"Of course, Mr. Paulson. And please, be honest."

"Good, glad we got that little matter out of the way. The book, I must say, was dreadful. I only finished it to find out how bad it actually was."

Danielle was stunned. She had read through the work several times, even completing an extensive edit. While *Redemption* would probably never win any awards for literary excellence, she had a lot of faith in both the story and the writing.

"You're serious?" she asked.

Paulson leaned over the table as if he were imparting a secret of national importance. "The story reeks, Danielle. I hope you'll excuse my bluntness, but I've never been one to



beat around the bush. To take this to my boss would only invite a cruel joke at my expense. I'm afraid we'll have to pass on this."

"I...I really didn't expect this, Mr. Paulson. I found the manuscript to be very well-written and potentially successful in the commercial market."

"Which brings me to my other point," Paulson said.

*Oh shit.*

"I've known your father for many years, Danielle. He is a superb writer and he's made a lot of friends in the publishing industry. I dare say there are those that consider him the godfather of the mystery novel. While your father and I are not exceptionally close, I respect him a great deal. That's why we're here right now."

"I thought we were here to talk about a manuscript."

"No, I'm afraid that my interest in the work you submitted wouldn't have warranted an email or a phone call, and certainly not a face to face meeting."

"I don't understand."

"Danielle," Paulson began. His usually dour face now took on a look of true concern. "I've opted to meet with you because I think someone should, objectively, speak with you about your agency."

"I fail to see what you're—"

Paulson silenced her with a wave. "Being an agent is a very difficult thing. It's a fickle market and even the best of the best have trouble at times. Whether you make a sale or not, the bills come due every month. If you're not making sound business decisions, you would be forced to close the doors before you have a chance of seeing if you've got what it takes."

"Are you assuming that the Greer Literary Group may be a failing agency?"

"Come on now, Danielle, let's cut to the chase. There is no "group". There are only you and a single part-time receptionist. This is New York City; this is a playing field for the big boys."

"I think I've had enough of this conversation."

"Please. Hear me out."

Danielle hadn't liked Paulson from the start. Now, she was tiring of him completely. But she continued to sit. Hell,

maybe the arrogant asshole would at least pick up the check after he finished insulting her.

"I think you are intelligent and ambitious. However, after your, let's say, *abrupt separation*, from William Morris," Danielle cringed at that, hoping he didn't expound on what had been the talk of Publishers' Row for at least two days, "I think that opening your own agency was a rather rash decision on your part. While I have every confidence in your abilities, I think the move was a bit premature. Nevertheless, with proper seasoning, you may still have a bright future ahead of you."

"And who would provide me with this proper seasoning, Mr. Paulson, you?"

"As a matter of fact, it just so happens that I have a position open for a personal assistant. I think you would be well suited for it."

"Is that right?" She was unable to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

Paulson grinned. He reminded Danielle of a smiling baboon. "It would be a very rewarding endeavor."

"For whom, may I ask? For me, the pitiful agent wannabe without a marketable client, or you, employing an assistant known for spreading her legs for the boss man?"

"No, Mr. Paulson, I think not." Danielle took her wine glass filled with water, into her hand, raised it, and, in one quick twist of the wrist, flung the contents into Paulson's surprised face. "I trust you'll take care of the check." Then she was up and walking across the floor, trying hard not to cry.

~ \* ~

She could have walked back to the office, but her legs were rubbery and her knees felt like they might give out at any minute. Though she knew it was a frivolous expense, Danielle hailed a taxi for the short trip.

When the cab pulled up in front of the tall but aging building that housed the Greer Literary Group on the fourteenth floor, she felt a hundred years older than when she'd first set out for the Golden Svagli.

But such was the nature of the beast. You win some, you lose some. Or so she told herself nearly every morning when she pulled herself out of bed and somehow found the

courage to face a new day. So far, she was batting zilch and if her luck failed to improve, her morning commute would be cut down to nothing. Her lease on her apartment was close to expiring and, as of now, she didn't have enough to keep it. Her utility bills were past due and her cable had been cut off last month. Pretty soon, she'd be forced to move into her office on a fulltime basis, and even though Glenda worked for next to nothing, she'd have to let her go as well. But how long would she be able to stay open with no income?

She could ask her father for the money. He would be all too happy to help finance his only daughter's agency for a while. But such charity would be impossible for her to accept. Donovan Greer was a legend, if authors could be called such names anymore. He'd twice won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, and he'd churned out critically acclaimed novels which made him a fortune before Danielle was even born. But in his private life, Donovan Greer was nowhere near the literary gentleman that his self-image proclaimed. Nothing came free from him. Certainly not a handout.

She still had a couple weeks before she had to decide on a course of action. There was a little money in her bank account so as long as she was able, she would pursue her dream.

The building had no doorman. Danielle pushed through the doors and stepped into a lobby that had, undoubtedly, been grand a few decades ago, but had now begun to show its age. Cracks ran up the walls like spider webs and dust covered everything. Her high heels clicked on tile floor which had probably last been shined when Reagan had still been in office. But a glance at the building's directory which was mounted beside the bank of elevators made all that cosmetic despair seem unimportant. In white letters, Greer Literary Group was listed on the 14<sup>th</sup> Floor, in suites 14A and 14B. It might be a little silly, the pride she took in those few letters, but take pride in it she did.

Only when the elevator began to tremble during its ascent was Danielle again reminded of the building's condition. When the doors slid open, she offered a silent prayer of thanks that the car had made it up all fourteen floors one more time.

The carpet in the corridor was so thin down the center

that it almost shone under the lights. The walls, probably once white, were now closer to beige and even blackened in some areas. Besides her agency, the rest of the 14<sup>th</sup> floor was vacant and the sense of isolation had never been lost to either Danielle or Glenda, her assistant.

Danielle pushed through the glass door with the words *Greer Literary Group, Danielle Greer, Agent*, etched in the center. She was glad to see Glenda behind the reception counter. Danielle hadn't doubted that her friend and employee would be there, but the face of an ally was a reassuring sight here in the Big Apple.

"Well," Glenda started before the door had completely closed behind Danielle, "tell me how it went."

"I'd rather not," Danielle said.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah. And Paulson was the last on the list. Looks like our ticket to fame will not be *Redemption*."

"So ten publishers didn't like it. Maybe they're all wrong."

"Seventeen at last count. They could be wrong, but either way, they're not buying."

"Give them a month and they'll be begging to publish it."

"I don't know that we have a month, Glenda." Danielle took a seat in a generic, vinyl-padded chair on the wall opposite from the reception desk. The small outer office was only about twenty by twenty so she was still close enough to see the pile of Priority Mail boxes on Glenda's desk and could probably even make out the writing on the address labels. Slush, it never stopped coming.

One of the most agonizing things about Danielle's job was reading the crap routinely submitted and touted by the submitter as the best thing ever written. While it was customary for agents to accept query letters, one-page letters that told a little about the proposed book, a little about the author, and the author's credentials, Danielle learned early on that it was close to impossible to learn if a writer's work was worth pursuing from such a brief introduction. Sometimes agents preferred a multi-page synopsis of the work as well as a chapter by chapter outline. Again, Danielle found it almost impossible to gauge a work's

potential from such small indicators. While it was certainly quite expensive for an author to print out and submit an entire manuscript to an agent, it was the first step in finding out how much an author was committed to selling his work.

But there was a downside. Most book manuscripts ran upwards of four or five hundred pages, double-spaced. Such blocks of fiction were not easy to sort through, and even with both her and Glenda reading a large part of their day, they were falling further and further behind.

"You think our golden goose might be hiding in that pile?" Danielle asked, pointing to the opened pile of cardboard boxes to Glenda's right.

"I...don't want to sound too negative, but I am constantly astounded by what people feel they must share with the world."

"All bad?"

Glenda was a little older than Danielle and had been her secretary ever since she'd been promoted to associate agent. While super smart and a master of organization, she was heavy in the bosom and fast at the mouth, and never knew which to use first against a man. Her personality was angelic in the best of times and harshly abrasive in the worst. She and Danielle had become fast friends and when Danielle had been forced out of her position, Glenda was raring to go with her. Her husband, Jeff, was a captain on the New York Police Department and made a comfortable income. Glenda only worked because she got bored attending to her housework and couldn't stand becoming a socially active "wifey." That meant two things to Danielle. First, Glenda took satisfaction from her work and secondly, she would work for whatever Danielle would be able to pay.

"Well, let's see." Glenda said, ticking her fire engine red fingernails on her pile of "already read." "We have one story here of the fictional King Whoompas who, incidentally, was once a powerful magician in a royal court but used his powers to have himself reincarnated into royal lineage. King Whoompas has an affection for ladies of the four-legged variety, if you catch my drift, and believes that only his crossbred offspring can save the enchanted land of Fornication from utter and complete devastation."

"At least it's creative."

"Isn't it, though? Next up we have a lovely romantic drama that involves a family of Appalachian cannibals that just happen to run a whorehouse."

Danielle laughed.

"No, here's the best part. Seems that the patriarch of the cannibal family, Grindor Meet, that's really his name, has his sights set on a North Carolina senate seat and wins it by, get this, eating the competition and courting the widow."

Danielle exaggerated a gagging sound. "Okay, so we're the only normal people left in this whole world, I guess."

"I'd have to say that by judging from this slush, that yes, boss lady, we are the last two people in the world with any sense of decency or moralistic integrity."

"I have a pile on my desk as well?"

"Only the best for you, my love. I took a few tons of this crap home over the weekend and pretty much caught up. At least until the mail ran today. The freshest of the sludge is patiently awaiting you in your office."

"You're the best, Glenda," Danielle said, genuinely touched that she'd been committed enough to take the work home with her, without even being asked.

"Shhh, don't let my husband know."

"It'll be our little secret," she said as she opened the door to her office and stepped in, wondering what kind of dreck awaited her.

~ \* ~

When she first opened her office, Danielle's father asked to visit. She begged off giving him a tour for as long as possible, which had been long enough. Less than two weeks, as a matter of fact. When he stepped into the small lobby, his smile faltered. When she showed him her office he'd, just as Danielle expected, snarled, and turned his nose up to the modest space.

Donovan Greer had been born the poor son of a coal miner in southern Pennsylvania. For the first seventeen years of his life he'd lived, as the rest of his family, hand to mouth. He had never even owned a new pair of shoes. Instead, everything he had was handed down from either an older brother or relatives. Then, having enough of that life, he enlisted in the army and traveled the world. After a few

years, the young Donovan tired of that life as well and had been given an honorable discharge. He'd been trained as an infantryman so when he moved back to civilian life had quickly joined the NYPD. He'd learned, while in the military, that he had a knack for writing stories. And, just a year after moving to New York City had penned and published the first of his many literary accomplishments, *Dead Man's Alley*. His work was polished and refined enough to rise above the pulps published at that time and in no time gained a rather healthy following. Each new book brought new readers and before long, Donovan Greer quit the police force and started writing fulltime. That had been thirty-five years ago and now there were millions of copies of his books in circulation, not one title out of print.

He owned a mansion on Long Island and another in the Hamptons. That his daughter worked in such conditions seemed to embarrass him and he'd stormed from the place. She'd received a message on her machine at the apartment telling her that if she needed money, he'd be glad to send her all she needed. A wonderful gesture, but delivered for all the wrong reasons.

Still, Danielle liked her office. The window was small and the desk scarred. The swivel chair she now sat in had seen much better days and the furniture, a small sofa and two wingback chairs, had come from a used furniture market. But, it was all hers and she had more confidence in her new agency than she'd ever had in anything.

There were six boxes sitting atop her desk next to her keyboard. She had no special system for sorting the submissions, usually employing the first come, first serve scheme.

The first submission of the afternoon was from Robert Caulder of Ivy Springs, Mississippi. Danielle grabbed the pull-tab and yanked the package open, pulling a thick manuscript bound with several rubber bands, a stamped, self-addressed return envelope, and a single cover letter.

Her hopes sank when she discovered that the manuscript was horror, but found the cover letter to be brief and professional. She pulled the rubber bands free and added them to an ever-growing pile on the floor. She kept red pens in a Columbia coffee mug on her desk and gripped

one as she began to read over the script. To save herself undue stress, Danielle had one rule. If she found more than a dozen errors in the first three pages, she tossed the manuscript. If an author didn't have the ability to correct simple mistakes before submitting work for possible representation, then the relationship would be doomed from the get-go.

She read the title page. Everything was in the appropriate format, amazing how so many times it wasn't. She started on chapter one on the next page. She moved to page two with her red pen still in the air. Then onto the third and fourth pages.

By the second chapter she'd set her red ink pen to the side, almost forgotten.

And she read.

And read.

And read some more.

It was close to midnight when she leaned back in her chair, rubbed her eyes, and yawned.

She had finished the manuscript. Besides a bathroom break or two and telling Glenda bye for the evening, she'd consumed the whole thing in one sitting.

She stacked the manuscript back together and straightened errant edges. "Hello, golden goose," she said and decided to call in the only favor she had left.



## Seven

Rob had been back at work for six weeks the day he got the call from New York.

At first he looked forward to going back to the factory. Sitting in the house all day long had grown very old, very fast. He'd taken the last couple days of medical leave to do a tune-up on the old Honda street bike in the shed. With Ellen's car the only one running—the insurance company was really dragging their feet on his car—Rob had to find a way to get back and forth to work. While Ellen was not keen on the idea of him riding the Honda, she couldn't argue with his logic. It hadn't taken all that much work, really. Rob flushed out the gas tank. Changed the plugs and bought a new front tire.

It took him a few trips up and down the back roads to get the feel of the old bike again, but he finally did.

Work, on the other hand, didn't come back so easily. He supposed he'd gotten a little lazy while laid up at the house. His job required a lot of walking and for the first week, by the time his shift was over, Rob's feet ached and burned. More than that, work severely cut into his writing time.

When he finished *The Killing Field*, he scoured the agent listings in his *Writer's Digest Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*, finding five prospective agencies to send copies of his book. Since his printer was out of ink and he wanted to submit complete manuscripts, he decided that The Copy Shop downtown would be a more economical alternative to buying four or five ink cartridges. The copying of his script and the mailing expense cost close to two

hundred bucks, but he put it on Ellen's credit card and hoped he could think of a good way to explain it when the bill came due.

He heard back from all five almost immediately. Three had sent back form rejection letters saying thanks for the submission, but it just wasn't what they were looking for at that time. One was a more personal rejection, saying that while the Rob's project looked promising, horror was just too hard a sell in the current market climate.

The fifth, however, had been the acceptance he'd been praying for. While he was being offered representation only and no sale had actually taken place, he was still overcome with excitement. The letter sounded promising and a three-page contract was included. After reading the agreement over several times, he signed it and sent it back via express mail, again using Ellen's charge card.

After that he did his best to push thoughts of an impending sale from his mind. Still, he checked the mailbox religiously, as well as his email, hoping to hear something positive.

He'd begun work on another novel, as well. He paced himself this time to avoid exhaustion. The new work was coming wonderfully, and so far his headaches hadn't returned.

He was deep in dreams when the phone started ringing and it took several moments for him to understand just what the sound was.

He cleared his throat as he brought the receiver to his ear. "Hello."

"Yes, could I please speak with Mr. Robert Caulder?" It was a female's voice. Prim and proper, and coolly professional.

"This is he," Rob said, wondering what underpaid bill she was trying to collect on. Usually he checked the caller ID before answering.

"Mr. Caulder, this is Danielle Greer," Rob tried to place the name, "calling from Greer Literary Group."

Suddenly, he knew. This was his agent. They'd only corresponded sparingly through email. "Yeah. How can I help you, ma'am?"

"Did I wake you?"

"I work nights, but that's okay." Becoming more awake now, Rob glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes after three in the afternoon.

"Well, maybe this will wake you up a bit. *The Killing Field* just sold to Penton Publishing for an advance of five thousand dollars and a royalty of ten percent of net sales."

Rob bolted upright in the bed. "Could you say that one more time, please? I'm not sure I heard you right."

His agent's laugh sounded like a real person, which he reasoned she probably was. Until now, Rob had been under the impression that Danielle Greer did not truly exist and he had signed with some scam artist running an operation to steal the creative ideas of unwitting, aspiring writers. Now, the pleasant music of her laughter made her flesh and blood to him. "Yes, I could repeat that. Penton Publishing, a well-respected house for romance and thrillers, is preparing to launch a horror line, *Scream Books*. They plan to publish one mass market paperback title every month for the first year. They've selected yours as their inaugural selection. All you have to do is say yes and I'll email you the contract. Print it off and mail it to me and we have a deal."

"Five thousand, you say?"

"Plus ten percent of net. The first printing is going to be huge, probably one hundred thousand copies. They plan for all the book chains to carry it as well as some secondary markets like the bulk clubs and maybe even the larger Wal-Marts and Targets."

Rob tried to swallow, but found his throat had tightened, almost swollen shut. He knew the book was good and thought it would sell. But fantasy and reality were two completely different spheres. For once in his life the two seemed to have collided, to have melded into one and the same.

"Mr. Caulder, are you there?"

This was his dream, his big, shiny, flashy dream and it was happening. This very moment, the thing he'd always wanted most in life, was coming to pass.

"Mr. Caulder?"

"I'm here. I'm sorry; it's just a lot to take in."

"I completely understand your excitement. You must be thrilled."

"That is nothing if not an understatement, Mrs. Greer."

"It's Ms. Greer, but please, call me Danielle."

"Danielle. This is great, just *great*."

"I must say I was really intrigued with your book. I'm usually not into horror, but *The Killing Field* was astounding."

Rob was glad they were on the phone; he wouldn't want anyone to see him blushing as badly as he was. "Thanks. Thanks a lot. Would you be interested in seeing my new work?"

"You have another finished manuscript?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. It's a little longer than the first, but I think it's even better."

"What's the title?"

"*From the Ashes*. It's different from *The Killing Field* in that instead of your basic slasher novel, it's more of psychological horror."

"Sounds good. Listen, you think that you could send that to me today via email? I don't have too much going on this evening. I'd like to at least look over it tonight."

"Yeah, that'd be great. I'll send it along immediately."

"Wonderful. And Robert—"

"Make that Rob, Danielle."

"Okay, Rob, congratulations on your first sale."

"Thank you."

When Rob set the phone down, he got out of bed. Sleep had fallen from him and he was wide awake. In a tee shirt and boxers, he left the bedroom and headed down to the basement.

Once there, he fired up his computer and as soon as the Internet browser popped up, he opened his email program. After dashing off a quick note to Danielle, he attached the manuscript of *From the Ashes* and sent it out into cyberspace.

He glanced at his watch, saw it was a few minutes to four, and figured he had just enough time for a trip into town.

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A few minutes after getting off the phone with Robert Caulder, Danielle checked her inbox and found his new manuscript waiting for her. She opened the document and settled in for the read.

An hour later she got up from her chair, stretched, and grabbed her things for the trip home. She hadn't finished the manuscript of *From the Ashes* but she'd scanned over enough to know it was another golden egg and she might've just stumbled upon her meal ticket.

And his voice sounded sexy. Of course it wasn't professional to think such thoughts about a client, but she couldn't help it. She would try to remember to take a look at the photo that he would submit to *Scream Books* for the author bio.

As for now, she'd head home for a nice microwave meal and reruns on television. Yep, hers was a glamorous life.

~ \* ~

Ellen Caulder pulled up to her house at a few minutes after five. It had been a long day and she was looking forward to a hot bath and a soothing night of relaxation on the couch.

She stepped through the front door and gasped, smiling at the red rose petals scattered in the foyer. All the lights were out and though it was still daylight, the interior of the house was swathed in shadow. Faint music wafted down from upstairs. Her gaze followed the strewn petals. They led from the foyer to the stairs and upward. On each riser, one or two petals sat, luring the eye to the next step.

Ellen closed the door behind her and placed her purse on the floor.

In the last few weeks, since his wreck as a matter of fact, Rob had been withdrawn, almost cold, toward her. While he had done his best to treat her well, she knew something weighed heavily on his mind. But at least he'd been writing. Too much, really. Since they'd been married, Rob had tried to write, having never really been able to commit very much to paper. Then, after the wreck, he fell into the habit of spending hours down in the cellar. Ellen had gone from wishing her husband could write to hoping that he could stop.

But the rose petals won her over. Even as she was ascending to the second floor she regretted her frame of mind over the last several weeks. She had been selfish to think Rob cared more for a book than for her. He never

complained about how many hours she spent outside, tending to her garden or to her flowers. He'd even been good enough to help her as much as possible. But wasn't that the point? While he could be with her while she did what she wanted outside, even if only for a while, she was unable to contribute to his endeavors, even minutely. Writing was a solitary act; she had no illusions about that. But it would be nice if he asked her to read over a few pages, to offer her opinion of his work. To in some way share that part of his life with her.

But none of that mattered now as she reached the second floor landing. Jazz flowed from the bedroom door, which was ajar. Benny Goodman, if she wasn't mistaken. While growing up, music of all kinds had been outlawed in the family home. Even the gospel hymns of church had no place within the Caulder household. The only music ever heard was at school and during infrequent visits to friends' homes. When he first told her that, Ellen thought he'd been exaggerating, but it hadn't taken her long to understand that throughout his childhood, his parents, especially his mother, had gone to extraordinary lengths to shelter him from the world. Television, as well as books, was heavily censored. Such censorship might explain his utter dislike of all things contemporary and popular. While other kids were reading comics and going to movies on the weekends, Rob was at home watching either Public TV or thumbing through some dusty tome written decades earlier.

When he enrolled in college, it had been like being exposed to an alien lifestyle. MTV, the Internet, girls, and R-rated films. Ellen remembered Rob saying it was all almost too much to take. Almost. Usually sheltered children who finally break free from their parents or guardians and enter the real world are so ill-equipped to survive beyond their realm of comfort they go simply wild. They feel so free and unencumbered they feel they must try and do everything. Usually, they go too far, stepping over a line that once crossed, can never be changed.

Rob had not done that. While he'd no doubt taken in a lot of music and had his share of dates, he remained pretty close to his highly moral background. It was that very sensibility that attracted her in the first place. While the

entire world lay before him, Rob chose to listen to jazz versus heavy metal, read Steinbeck instead of Kerouac or Ginsberg. At times, he seemed older than his years, and at others, a bright-eyed child in awe of the world around him.

Ellen pushed open the door and stepped into a candle-lit room. The scents of cinnamon and of lilac infused the room. In the dim light, Ellen saw that the covers of the bed were turned back and a sprinkling of the same deep red petals were strewn across it. From her right, Rob stepped toward her. He held a champagne flute in each hand.

She opened her mouth to ask him what the occasion was, but before she could get a word out, he kissed her. It was a long, passionate kiss. It had been a long time.

When he finished, he handed her a drink. "A celebration is in order."

She took a sip of the chilled liquid. "Mind telling me why?"

Rob smiled. He was actually beaming; Ellen found the look endearing. "I thought you'd never ask. Ellen Claire Caulder, I must inform you that you are married to a soon-to-be-published author."

"What?" Ellen's hand flew to her mouth, her surprise writhing through the word.

"Yes, Ma'am. I just sent in the contract for my first book. I'll have a check coming in the mail any day."

"Rob, that's...that's wonderful. I didn't even know you'd finished it. After all this time you've finished *A Promise Kept*?"

"Not exactly. Actually, it's a completely different book. But that doesn't matter right now." Rob turned his glass up and drained the golden liquid. He gingerly took hers and placed it on the top of the dresser. "What matters now is that you and I have all night long to show just how much we love each other."

"Well," she began, "that definitely sounds like a plan to me."

The two moved as one to the bed and, for a very long time, made love amid rose petals.

## ***Eight***

By the time *The Killing Field* hit the shelves, Rob had already received the check for the twenty-five thousand dollar advance on *From the Ashes*. As it turned out, the editor for Scream Books, Dan Roxy, was not only a long-time fan of horror fiction but was fast becoming a fan of Robert Caulder as well. *The Killing Field* had been rushed into production by Scream. The contracts had been signed in May and the first printing had been in stores by the third week of October in an effort to attract the cash of Halloween shoppers.

While books were sometimes put out in shorter time periods, it was the norm to release books approximately a year after acceptance. A lot of work went into book production. Cover art, editing, and a host of other details, it usually took that long to get everything right. Since Scream already had its distribution network in place, thanks to its parent, Penton Publishing, as well as artists, reviewer lists, etc., but with no titles out making money, Roxy pushed for that five month schedule. Other books would be released on the first of each month.

During the 1980s, horror fiction underwent a tremendous boom. Booksellers carried at least a half dozen horror titles at any given time. There was such a demand for horror that books, which would never have been published under ordinary circumstances, received big pushes from publishers. After a while the entire market became saturated with unprofessional novels of the macabre. At the close of the decade public demand diminished, leaving a glut of those novels unsold. This created such a backlash that some



publishers had completely gone under from being unable to move their horror titles. Writers well on their way to fame and wealth found themselves looking for non-literary employment and only the big names like King, Koontz, Saul, and Rice made it through.

For the rest of the century, horror had been a hard sale. However, it wasn't only literature that had taken a big hit. Television and the film industry also suffered their own versions of the backlash. Suddenly, science fiction and fantasy were the big genres and you'd be lucky if you found a new horror fantasy on the shelves of even the biggest chain bookstores in the country. The smart writers made the move to thrillers and mysteries or faded away into obscurity. But around the year 2000, small, independent publishers began publishing small print runs of limited editions of horror titles via mail order. Mostly expensive hardcovers with intricate detail and original artwork, these releases often sold for at least double of what you could find in the traditional brick-and-mortar stores. As online commerce came into its own, online booksellers began popping up and the numbers of these independent publishing houses seemed to double and even triple overnight.

When the number of sales began to rival smaller traditional houses, a few forward-looking editors looked to try their own hand at bringing such titles back to the shelves. Pinnacle Books, Leisure Fiction, and Tor Book were among the first to bring terror tales back to the mainstream.

Hollywood, as well, was taking notice of the resurgence in interest. Slasher movies rolled into production. Classics such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Halloween* were being redone in order to appeal to a whole new generation. This coming year, as a matter of fact, several big budget horror films were slated and early predictions were that they would dominate the box office.

Last year, Gerald Penton, the grandson of Roosevelt Penton and founder of Penton Publishing, noticed the move back to the campy horror novels of the seventies and eighties. Gerald didn't know much about horror, never had the stomach for it. So he did what other successful businessmen did; he tapped resources. Dan Roxy had been a big name at Shannon House as fiction editor a few years

back, but retired early and had taken his sailboat around the world. Roxy, a specialist in all that was scary when it came to the written word, was offered a job as the top man for Penton's proposed horror line. Apparently sailing the seven seas hadn't been as alluring as Roxy believed. It hadn't taken a whole lot of convincing.

Now, twelve releases were scheduled for the next year. While the roster of projects was exciting, Roxy was especially taken with the new writer, Robert Caulder.

Promotion was a big issue. While book tours and signings were all fine and dandy, money was better spent with displays, posters and sending out ARCS, Advance Reading Copies, to major reviewers.

Three months after it was released, Caulder's debut novel was now being discussed on Internet message boards, podcasts, and in the general public. While the book was nowhere close to a mainstream hit, Roxy was quite pleased by the Bookscan numbers.

When Danielle Greer passed along the second Caulder manuscript, Roxy fell in love with it as well. Completely absorbed by the work, Roxy planned a marketing scheme that would push not only Robert Caulder and his sophomoric effort into the limelight, but Scream Books as well.

If this man could keep producing this type of work, well, who knew where he might end up? As for the man himself, Roxy had spoken with Caulder a handful of times on the phone and was genuinely impressed by his personality. Modest and sincere, he had a gentle kind of voice and sounded nothing like a man who could have imagined such terror. But, of course, one never knew the madness that lurked within the mind of another.

Roxy was betting he could produce more. A first novel can be a fluke, a literal flash in the pan. With the second book, authors are not only faced with outdoing their first, but the false sense of having mastered the art of writing can leave them, high and dry, in the middle of their follow-up. He'd seen it happen to very talented people. But with Caulder's second attempt, the sophomore jinx had been averted completely. True, the book had a vastly different format than its predecessor and it straddled the fence of several genres. It did, however, also show a great jump in

his ability and his command of the written word.

All in all, Roxy placed a great amount of faith in the unknown writer. That's how the big advance for *From the Ashes* came about. Twenty-five G's wasn't a fortune, but for an upstart imprint like *Scream* it was virtually unheard of. Of the twelve contracts Roxy sent to other writers, it was by far the largest. Paperback originals usually received an average advance of five to ten thousand. If the book sold, healthy royalty checks were distributed. If not, well, the house was lucky to break even. Roxy was not a gambling man, but he gambled on Caulder. If *Scream* was to survive its initial year, he had to find talent, real talent. But more than that, he had to find books that would sell. Just because a writer was talented, didn't mean his stuff would sell. Even if the story was interesting and the cover art alluring, it didn't mean a thing. It was a careful combination of all the contributing factors, with a lot of luck thrown in for good measure. But with Caulder, Roxy prayed he had the right mix. If not, he'd have a lot of things to explain to Penton.

Twenty-five thousand of them, as a matter of fact.

This book would need a lot more exposure than the first. But, then again, that was to be expected. The sad fact was that most people didn't read any more. Besides the newspaper and an occasional magazine article, reading was fast becoming a lost form of entertainment. A few years ago, the evolution away from the printed page was blamed on Hollywood for releasing movie versions of fast-selling novels. But even that was a fairy tale. There were times, though long ago, that the average consumer bought at least one book a month. That bygone time was known as the Golden Age in publishing. Now, a recent survey discovered that the average consumer buys only two books a year. And eight out of ten books purchased were written by an author the consumer had read before. That didn't leave a lot of room for growth. Roxy remembered being depressed by the news.

Still, the hot writers of the moment wouldn't live forever, and every now and then a book came along that would just grab readers by the hundreds, if not the thousands. J.K. Rowling with her Harry Potter series, Dan Brown and his *The Da Vinci Code*. Books like those were literally one in a million, but it did happen.

Maybe Robert Caulder had that kind of appeal.  
Maybe he didn't.  
But Roxy was sure as hell gonna find out.

~ \* ~

The advance against royalties' check of forty-two hundred, fifty dollars hadn't lasted very long at all. It had come in time for the insurance company's decision to total Rob's car. Since the Le Baron was worth only two thousand, that's all he received for it. He put three more with it and purchased a much-used Jeep Wrangler. The Jeep had a lot of miles on it and was not in the best of shape. Still, he was thrilled. Since his teenage years, Rob had wanted one and now he had it. While a little rough around the edges, he was immensely proud of the midnight blue vehicle.

Danielle Greer received fifteen percent of the initial five grand and Rob considered it money well spent.

With the little that remained of the advance, Rob bought Ellen a diamond necklace from the jeweler downtown and surprised her with it the day his novel was released. With a little over a hundred dollars left to show for his debut novel, Rob preordered fifteen copies of *The Killing Field* from the Barnes and Noble website. In addition, Scream Books would give him twenty copies. He compiled a list of people he wanted to send the books to. In his spare time, he practiced his signature for signing the books when they became available. He did this in private, because even though he would be doing it in reality in a matter of months, it still made him feel a little stupid.

The third week of October rolled around and with it came the next advance check, much larger than its predecessor. The book was released on a Tuesday, and he already had his copies. He was waiting for Ellen so they could ride into town and buy one copy from everywhere that stocked the book.

His copies arrived in two separate cardboard boxes by way of UPS. He still remembered cutting through the packing tape with a steak knife from the kitchen, reaching through the bubble wrap and pulling out *his* book. He'd seen cover art as well as galleys, but holding the actual product in his hands was something else all together. It was an almost-religious moment. The book didn't look all that different from

thousands of others on shelves throughout the world. But there was a difference, oh yes sir'ee. The name Robert Caulder appeared across the front, raised lettering in shiny silver foil across a background of smoky black. The cover image was of a long, narrow road leading past a green, generic looking city limits sign that read: *Coopersville, Population Fifteen Hundred, A Nice, and Safe Place to Live*. Immediately underneath the white lettering on the sign was a skull drawn in dripping blood. Beneath the image was the title in the same raised foil as his name. Along the spine was the screaming skull logo of *Scream Books* and the title, then his name. On the back was a short two paragraph synopsis of the novel.

It was, to Robert Caulder, a thing of exquisite beauty.

He thumbed through the book, remembering each page as if it were a forgotten dream, reborn into his conscious world.

He wasted no time slicing off the front cover and mounting it in a nice frame on the one bare wall of his office.

While waiting for his wife, he read the feature story the local paper, the *Ivy Springs Gazette*, did on him the previous Sunday. By now he'd read the words so many times they were indelibly committed to memory. Still, that didn't keep him from reading it over and over.

#### *Local Author Gets First Novel Published*

*Gather round, folks, Robert Caulder has a story to tell. The twenty-eight year old Winchester County resident has signed with the newly created Scream Books, an imprint of the New York City Publisher, Penton Publishing, to release his debut novel, The Killing Field. A story of a rambler who stumbles into a small city that truly should be avoided at all costs, this debut is laced with shivery horror and gut-wrenching drama.*

*The Killing Field will be available in a paperback edition and you'll be able to pick one up at any local bookstore.*

*While this marks Mr. Caulder's first release, he strived to produce a novel for the last five years. If early reviews are any indication, his long hours may be paying off quite well. Booklist called the book, "An edge of the seat read...Caulder is a man to be reckoned with." And Publisher's Weekly stated*

*that The Killing Field is a "...monumental debut of a superior talent."*

*Mr. Caulder has also sold his second novel, tentatively entitled From the Ashes, to Scream Books. Mr. Caulder is married to Ellen, his wife of five years and works locally in the security industry.*

Under the short story was the picture Rob chose for his author bio. While the article was brief and the photo grainy, it was on the first page. And while it wasn't the *New York Times*, it was definitely a step in the right direction.

Rob had been doing more in his spare time than working on another novel and reading his own press. Scream Books had launched [www.robertcaulder.com](http://www.robertcaulder.com) several weeks ago and just yesterday, in anticipation of *The Killing Field's* release, activated the Robert Caulder Message Board on their website.

Up until now, Rob had very little experience with the Internet. He'd browsed it as much as anyone, he supposed. But for research and leisurely surfing, the electronic world was close to being a mystery to him.

But he was learning. He used his browser to locate several of the top horror sites. Not only those specializing in dark literature, but films and comics as well. Initially, he penned a list of the top movies to see and books to read.

It had occurred to him that as his fan base grew, which he desperately hoped it would, so would the need for contact with his readers. He needed a passing knowledge of the genre. He surely didn't want to be seen as a poseur or fraud. He tasked himself with becoming familiar with not only the present movements in horror but those of the latter part of the twentieth century as well.

He started with a trip to the city library, choosing titles by Stephen King, Dean Koontz, John Saul, Clive Barker, and Richard Matheson. In addition to "ghost writing," he had gained another ability since the wreck. He was able to read at an almost superhuman pace. Besides the lightning speed at which he read the books, his retention of the material was close to one hundred percent. It was like scanning pages into a computer. Rob soon worked through the library's entire horror section. Being a small town branch, there hadn't been very much to begin with.

Over the last several weekends he raided the Blockbuster downtown, starting with the older flicks at a dollar a pop. He moved up to the new releases just this morning. Unfortunately, his newfound powers didn't extend to the ability to watch movies at an accelerated pace. He was, however, watching them as quickly as possible.

All in all, Rob was not completely thrilled with either the books or the movies. From the sea of sludge, though, he did select some he liked and even a few he really loved.

Stephen King, for example, was a truly superb writer. From his debut, *Carrie*, up to, and including, *Pet Semetary*, the writing was virtually flawless. From then on out, however, he found King to be hit-and-miss. The thick *Bag of Bones* was the scariest of them all, actually causing Rob to look over his shoulder just to make sure there was nothing sneaking up on him. In contrast, the last few were well below the King standard.

Rob had also stumbled across the small and independent press, purchasing several books through the online bookstore, Horror-Mall, and several other comparable sites.

If Rob had to pick a favorite from all that he'd read, it would be Dean Koontz hands down. While Koontz's books rarely fell cleanly into the horror category, often combining drama, science fiction, fantasy, and suspense to the mix, he was the most consistent, as well as the most entertaining writer he'd come across.

On the downside, if he kept buying books and renting horror flicks at this rate, his entire advance would be spent without anything to show but a head full of plots and a growing desire to read more.

Music, as well, was something he was trying to learn about. Contemporary music, well really music of any kind, had been taboo in his house while growing up. During his brief college days he'd experienced many different forms from 70's heavy metal to 90's grunge, but had ultimately settled on jazz and the softer music by the likes of Sinatra.

Now, he was delving into the harder stuff with a bit more interest. While a lot of the music wasn't all that bad, he shied away from the groups where the lead singer sounded more like *Sesame Street's* Cookie Monster than an actual

human vocalist. Rob found the same themes working their way through the songs as he'd come across in much of the fiction he'd been reading. Maybe he wasn't yet a fan of the darker side of music, but he was trying.

Rob folded the newspaper article neatly and reminded himself, yet again, to purchase a frame for it so he could showcase it on his bare wall. He stretched back in his chair and looked around at the basement. Over the last several months, he'd spent an ungodly amount of time down here, almost starting to think of the damp, dim cellar as his home instead of the house above it.

On the monitor in front of him was the text of his new novel. His first two ventures had been sold and he had the money in the bank—well, what remained of it, anyway. All in all, everything should be wonderful.

But it wasn't. Was that human nature or a sign of his deviated greed for more?

His head hurt like hell. The headaches had disappeared altogether for awhile, but had recently returned. The pain had been mild at first, but intensified steadily day after day. If that was all, he could probably handle it, but the headaches were just the tip of the iceberg. Rob had been undergoing more changes.

No longer were the words he typed unknown to him before coming out through the tips of his fingers. Novels, full and complete, now existed inside his head. Stories, people, whole worlds spun within his cranium. It was all he could do to tell the real world from fantasy.

He pulled open his right-hand desk drawer and took out an unlabeled brown prescription bottle. He popped the top and shook out two Percocets. Unfortunately, his doctor believed it unnecessary to refill his Vicodin 'script. Since then, Rob had been buying painkillers from a guy he'd known in high school. Thank God for the advance money or he would never be able to afford them. He tossed the Percocets into his mouth and swallowed them with a swig from his water bottle. Although he *was* in pain, he took the pills more for their mind numbing effect than to kill the ache between his temples.

It helped. It helped fade the alternate realities swirling inside him like a hurricane.



If reality also faded a little, then that was just an added bonus.

He turned back to his work-in-progress and began as always. One word, then two. A sentence, a paragraph. Then a page, and on and on...until he heard the front door close and his wife's footsteps above him, though muffled, as if he were hearing it through a dense fog.

## ***Nine***

It was late in the evening on December 23<sup>rd</sup> and Danielle Greer was tidying up her desk in anticipation of a few days off for the Christmas holidays. As of late, she'd welcomed new clients in an attempt to have the same success she experienced with Caulder. While the two sales to Scream Books enabled Danielle to keep her head above water a while longer, it was no permanent solution. All in all, she'd only made a little over four thousand dollars on the two books. Perhaps in the small town Caulder called home that kind of money would buy you a lot. But in the Big Apple, it was hardly more than chump change.

To keep both the agency open and her apartment, Danielle had to sell off some stock from her portfolio she'd been building since high school. While nowhere near a financial wizard, she invested well, but also cared enough that it pained her to part with them.

But that was neither here nor there.

Christmas was fast approaching and even though Glenda had invited her to a Christmas Eve party on Long Island, Danielle was quite sure she wouldn't make it. She knew she should go, if not simply for a change in scenery. She'd been working night and day, usually seven days a week. A large part of that had been ironing out Robert's contracts with Roxy over at Scream. But another large portion had been devoted to finding more talent. While Caulder may be her golden goose, the 24 karat eggs just weren't coming fast enough.

Of course, that wasn't fair to Rob. From the get-go, he'd been a dream to work with. While his manuscripts

hadn't needed very much editing, she'd made suggestions and he dutifully had carried them out, like a soldier trying to please a general. And as far as horror went, he was top-notch. Every now and then, however, she wished his gift was for romance for mainstream thriller. Who knows, maybe a huge hardcover sell would be in the immediate future. But with horror, paperback originals were probably the top of the game.

Then again, she really didn't have a reason to bitch. She spent her commission without thinking twice about the genre that brought the cash her way. Except, of course, when it ran out.

Snow was falling in the city, so Danielle grabbed her scarf from the back of her chair as well as her umbrella.

Her Christmas was destined to be a solitary one and the one gift left under her three-foot tree was to her, from her. If that wasn't sad, she didn't know what was. It would be nice to have someone at home waiting for her. Or even a call from some guy, just asking how her day had gone. Danielle was not repulsive. As a matter of fact, she considered herself reasonably attractive, although conceit didn't factor into her assessment of her physical attributes. Her honey-colored hair was cut in layers and reached to her shoulders. She had deep, dark brown eyes, fair-to-dark skin and a trim build that she worked at whenever she could catch a few minutes to jog—usually during her lunch hour. Probably the main reason that she had no partner in her life was simply because she didn't have the time. Before she went into business for herself, there was always time for men. While she didn't consider herself promiscuous, her appetite for the opposite sex was as healthy as the next person's. There just weren't enough hours in the day.

Perhaps she would visit her father for Christmas.

Perhaps not.

Her mother had been remarried for over twenty years and though she would never admit it to her mom, she didn't feel comfortable around her step-family.

She crossed the small office and flicked off the light. She was stepping through the door as her phone rang. Usually, she would've ignored it and headed on home. It took only a split second for her to realize she really didn't have

anything to go home to except a stunted little tree, a microwave turkey dinner and that one pitiful gift. The gift wasn't even wrapped, still in the bag she'd brought it home from the department store in.

"Greer Literary Group," she answered when she brought the receiver to her ear.

"Ms. Greer?" the voice was hesitant, mild.

"Yes," she said, hoping it wasn't a writer with the gall to phone in a query. In these days of instant gratification, people just didn't have the patience for letters, or even for email, for that matter. She'd received a few phone queries since she'd been in business. Though Glenda was vigilant, some always seemed to slip through the cracks. In most, if not all, instances, the proposal wasn't worth her time, and she realized why the writer didn't take the time to write a proper letter or submit a proper package: they weren't worth the ink and paper. Perhaps this gentleman thought that any agent caught so late in the evening the day before Christmas Eve might just be desperate enough to listen. Danielle was getting that desperate, true enough, but she hadn't quite arrived there.

"This is Robert Caulder, Ma'am, I hope I'm not disturbing you." Danielle placed the voice as soon as the caller gave his name. Most of their correspondence had been by e-mail, though the occasional phone conversation was required. In the spare talks she'd had with Caulder, she found him to be kind, intelligent, and to possess the keen politeness for which Southerners were so well-renowned.

"Robert, no. Of course you're not disturbing me. I work for you, remember?"

He laughed nervously. "Uh, the reason I'm calling is that I've just finished my new book. Just finished it this morning, actually."

*Ch-ching*, Danielle thought instantly.

"Well, that's wonderful news. Seems Santa came early to your house."

"Yeah, it kind of feels that way. But, but, uh..."

"Rob, what's on your mind?" A little seed of panic began to sprout in Danielle. Was he calling to cancel his contract? Had he found another agent? Had he, after selling two novels, decided he no longer needed a literary agent?

"Please, I'm here to help," she offered.

"Well, this book, it's called *Fear of the Dark*. It's a little longer than the last one. The finished book should run about five hundred pages or so."

"That's a little over what *Scream* likes, y'know. The extra pages add more cost to distributing the book."

"I know. And maybe that's why I'm calling?"

*Oh no*, she thought. *Has he decided to give up writing and go join a circus or something?*

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"Maybe it would be better if I just spit it out, huh?"

"Spit away."

"Well, I may be coming across as impatient, maybe even prima donna on you, and I don't mean to at all. But the point is that, *Scream* is doing a wonderful job with my books. *The Killing Field* is selling well and, from what I understand, *From the Ashes* will get a good push next summer when it comes out..."

"Yes..." Danielle took a seat behind her desk, her umbrella and purse dropping to the floor.

"Well, the way I see, it Ms. Greer—"

"Please, Danielle."

"Oh, all right. Anyway, Danielle, I really think *Fear of the Dark* is a really good novel. I mean *really* good. I think that to get it into the hands of more readers that we should ask more from *Scream*?"

"Okay, Rob. What kind of figure do you have in mind?"

He hesitated again, but only for a second. "One hundred thousand."

There was a hush over the phone line that lingered for a long while. Finally, Danielle cleared her throat. "That's a high figure, Rob. A really high figure for *Scream*. That kind of money usually is reserved for deals with hardcover editions. That's not *Scream's* forte. They do paperback originals. Keyword there being *originals*."

"I've been doing some research, Ms. Greer, uh, Danielle. Leisure, for instance, owned by Dorchester Publishing, is primarily a paperback publisher, but they've done hardcover editions for their bigger sellers like Richard Laymon. Signet does hardcovers for Bentley Little, though usually book club editions. The money is secondary, though.

To get the kind of promotion that I feel *Fear of the Dark* deserves, I think that *Scream* should have a bigger stake in it. A reason to get it out to as many stores as possible, to launch the ad campaigns."

"Okay," Danielle said. She was busy doing two things. First, trying to digest what Caulder was telling her and secondly, deciding how to dissuade him from such a high figure. Not that she didn't like the thought of her commission on such a large advance. The money certainly wouldn't go to waste. But Roxy would have a stroke over a number like that. Hell, she almost had one herself. "Can I ask why you feel such an advance is warranted? If the book is really as good as you say, it will sell. The royalty checks will roll in. As far as promotion, *Scream* is doing all it can to promote your work. Over half the line's advertising budget for next year is devoted to you alone."

"I understand that, Danielle. And I am grateful to *Scream*, to Roxy, and to you. But I'm at most a mid-lister. If even that, really. With this new novel, I could reach a whole new demographic of readers."

*Here we go.* It was amazing to Danielle how quickly the ego grew. She'd dealt with big-headed writers for years. Entertainers as a whole, whether they were musicians, actors, directors, producers, or writers, they all seemed to have an inflated opinion of their worth. While authors could hardly negotiate multi-million dollar deals like actors or musicians, they acted much the same. In the end it always came to cash, no matter what the pretense might be. Danielle understood that, and agreed to a point. But why should an entertainer, or even an athlete, make million after million while the minimum wage for the average person was still well below the poverty level? Money was power and power was money, but to see a comedian get twenty million per movie while a police officer working the streets, risking his life on a daily basis, made barely enough to make ends meet, was distressing to no end.

But it was the way of the world. And while one hundred thousand was quite a few zeros away from a million, it was still a hell of a lot of money to pay for a book.

Danielle chose to go the soft and tender route. That routine usually worked well with men. "I tell you what, Rob.

Email me the manuscript and I'll check it out. If it's as good as you say, maybe we can work something out with *Scream*."

"Thank you. That's all I can ask. And I just wanted to say I appreciate all your hard work for me."

"You're very welcome, Rob. Remember, when you do well, so do I."

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"You too," she said, but realized the connection was already broken.

~ \* ~

"So?" Ellen Caulder asked. She was seated across the table from Rob. In the background, Bing Crosby sang about snow and of dreaming. The sweet aroma of spiced cider filled the house, and lights, tinsel, and red ribbon occupied every available space. Though the first snowflake had yet to fall, the yuletide season was in full swing in the Caulder home.

"We'll just have to wait and see."

"Don't you think that's a lot of money?"

Rob looked at his wife. "Of course that's a lot of money. But the book is selling, Ellen. And the next one will as well. They're making money off me. They're going to make a lot more. Shouldn't we be getting some, too?"

"You don't think the publisher will just tell you to go to hell?"

"He could," Rob said. "But I don't think so. *Scream* is small, but Penton Publishing is pretty big. They've got the money, plenty of it, I'm sure."

"What if they'll only pay twenty-five like this time? Or maybe thirty or thirty-five?"

"Then that's when I tell *him* to go to hell."

Ellen nodded, but said nothing. Lately, that's how it had been. While they both occupied the house, they were becoming less talkative, as if they just didn't have anything to say and it just took too much energy to think of something to talk about.

"You've finished boxing up the books?" she asked. Rob had decided to give copies of *The Killing Field* as Christmas gifts. The paperbacks were inscribed and signed. Inside the book was a Caulder Christmas card. While such gift-giving might seem too self-indulgent, at seven bucks a pop, it was

highly economical. He even decided to pass one along to his mother and father. Rob knew full well that *that* would never be read. In fact, if the book didn't end up in the trash or in a brush fire, he'd be surprised.

"Yeah. I took the few that needed mailing to the post office the other day. They probably won't make it in time, but they shouldn't be too late."

Again, Ellen nodded.

Rob sipped from a steaming coffee mug.

Ellen drank from a Diet Coke.

"I was getting ready to wrap a few more presents. Would you like to help?"

Rob made a conscious effort to appear as if he were actually considering her request. "I'd like to. But I've got work to do downstairs."

Ellen didn't nod this time. Instead, she placed her hands on the table and interlaced her fingers. "Y'know, when we took our vows, it was for better or worse, in sickness and in health."

"Yeah," Rob answered. "I was there. But as far as I know, I'm not sick."

"The pills, Rob. The pills."

Rob was stunned. Though he had never taken the painkillers in front of his wife—at least not after his legitimate prescription had run out—he hadn't gone to extraordinary lengths to conceal his use either. Or had he? Either way, he hadn't been that aware she was wise to it. He started to speak, but she silenced him with a wave.

"I don't know exactly what kind they are, or how many you take every day. I know you take them, that's what matters."

"I still have headaches."

"I'm sure you do. But there's Tylenol and Advil, isn't there?"

"I have really bad ones."

"Why doesn't the doctor prescribe them, then?"

"I...I..."

"Exactly. You're hooked, Robert. Hooked on prescription drugs. The DEA says prescription drug use has become the number one form of drug abuse in the nation. It's an addiction like any other drug. But I'll help you."



Together, you can get off of them."

"I'm not hooked."

"You're intelligent enough to know that that is simply denial. Nothing more, nothing less."

Rob was quickly tiring of the conversation. As of late, his patience hadn't been long and Ellen seemed to know just how to cut it down to the quick.

"Let's talk about something else."

"Rob," Ellen said. The look across her face screamed astonishment. "Don't you dare shut me out." She stood, her cheeks beginning to redden.

"Don't you think you're being a little overly dramatic?"

"As a matter of fact, I do not. You sit there and tell me that we're not going to talk about you're using drugs and dismiss me like I'm a bother. How dare you!" Her finger jabbed the air in his direction.

Rob got up out of the chair, grabbed his Jeep keys from the peg on the kitchen wall. "You might enjoy this shit. But I'm getting the fuck out of here."

And he did.

"Merry damn Christmas," Ellen said, but there was no one to hear her.

~ \* ~

Her apartment was across town, in a fourteen-unit complex built only a few years ago. The windows were covered with crushed velvet, with absolutely no light penetrating into the darkened interior.

It had started innocently enough, as most things like this usually do.

She was pretty in a dark and unwholesome way. She wore jeans with holes and tears in them, the kind that cost much more than the ones without the holes and tears. A flowing black blouse stretched tight across her breasts. Her hair was black as a raven's claw, much too dark to be natural. Her pale face was blanched even more by white powder. Her eyes were outlined in black as well but the color of those orbs, a tender hazel flashing with delight and wit, betrayed her gothic appearance. Her name was Rachel, and she moved on him quickly.

Rob wanted nothing more than to get out of the house, away from Ellen's accusations and unblinking eyes.

With the Christmas holiday so close, however, his options were severely limited. Shoppers covered the streets of Ivy Springs.

He needed a drink, a break from all that god-awful cheer. Never much of a drinker, he wasn't sure how he knew that he did, indeed, need a drink.

So Rob, in his Jeep, searched out an appropriate watering hole. Amazingly, most of the few bars in town were closed. That boggled his mind. Wasn't Christmas the time of the year when people who were usually happy and gay found life altogether too depressing? Suicide rates shot up around this time of year, as did murders and robberies. Surely, he could find a decent place for a Coors in such dire times.

And he did.

The Twentieth Century Fox had been a roadhouse years earlier, but with a need to stay both politically correct and profitable it had slowly morphed into one of the most modern clubs in Ivy Springs. While the small town was not well known for its vivacious nightlife, the citizens did demand such places as the TCF and its contemporaries. While liquor couldn't be sold within Winchester County, beer and wine coolers always sold well. All the city council required was that no beer be sold before one on Sundays and never on Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Good Friday.

But on this late evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, the Fox was filled close to capacity. Rob entered and was lost amongst the crowd. By a stroke of luck that he took as a good omen, after downing his first beer, he got a seat at the bar. He ordered a second and sorely wished he'd had the sense to grab his bottle of Percocet before he left.

"Hey there," she said, sliding up between him and the guy sitting on the next stool.

"Hi," Rob managed.

"My name's Rachel," she said and smiled—almost wickedly.

"Well, hello Rachel. I'm—"

"Robert Caulder," she said.

"How did you know?"

The music was loud, but not blaring. Given the Fox's new life as a modern establishment, Hank Williams no longer played from the jukebox. Instead, Nickelback sang about a

past life in the song "Photograph." While it was still possible to converse with someone without shouting, you had to come in close to hear.

"I read *The Killing Field*. I loved it. Buy me a drink and I just might show you how much." That wicked smile once again. She must've recognized him from his photo in the *Gazette* or the back of the paperback, maybe both.

"By the way," he said. "Call me Rob."

It had been that simple. Amazing and unbelievable, perhaps. But all in all, that simple. It was the first time Rob had ever cheated on his wife, but it would hardly be the last.

He awoke the next morning—knowing the time only because of his watch, as the bedroom windows were covered in the same velvet as the rest of the apartment—with her next to him.

Guilt was the first thing he felt.

Crushing and smothering.

Then he licked his lips and could still taste her.

The guilt slowly slipped away.

The Goth girl in all her glory. It had definitely been an eventful night. On the way to her place, she told him she was a big fan and that anyone that could write such a wonderfully twisted story was someone she had to screw. Whatever kind of logic that actually was, Rob had no clue, but he wasn't about to argue.

She had been both sweet and sour. Full of both rage and tenderness. Nine Inch Nails played in the background when they'd begun. Lacuna Coil's "Heaven's a Lie," was playing when he'd fallen asleep, exhausted and spent.

Rob moved slowly out of the bed, found his clothes scattered across the floor and dressed quickly. The stale marijuana smoke still hovered in the room. He could vaguely remember Rachel stuffing the pot into a wizard-shaped water bong and the eyes glowed orange when you took a hit.

He had smoked only once before, in college, of course. Apparently he hadn't inhaled correctly or the weed had been substandard. All he received for his trouble was a headache. But last night was completely different. The pot increased his sex drive and by the time Rachel pulled him toward the bed, his mouth watered for her.

He laced up his shoes and was about to walk out. He

noticed a tube of lipstick on the dresser. He picked it up and removed the cap. Black, surprise, surprise!

He twisted the bottom until the lipstick jutted out about a quarter of an inch. Then in a careful hand, wrote on the dresser: To Rachel, Thanks for the Night. Robert Caulder. He replaced the top on the tube, took one last look at the pale, slim form twisted in the bed sheets, and left.

~ \* ~

When Rob made it home, it was a little after nine in the morning. Ellen's car was gone and the house was cold when he stepped in. Without bothering to look for a note—he knew she wouldn't have left one—he opened the door in the kitchen and walked down to the cellar. There, he booted up the PC and sent Danielle Greer the manuscript for *Fear of the Dark*.

After that, he shut down the computer, left the cellar and went upstairs to bed, hoping to dream of Gothic girls and all their sinful delights.

## ***Ten***

The New Year began well for Robert Caulder and his writing career. Danielle had gotten back to him about *Fear* in less than three days. Just as he'd hoped, she'd been excited and thrilled. She'd been so impressed with novel that she'd immediately sent it to *Scream*. Dan Roxy had loved it as well, going so far as to call it a "breakthrough work." He'd immediately offered thirty-five thousand for it.

"I was thinking of a number a lot higher than that, Dan."

"How much higher?"

"Oh, I'd say about a hundred grand."

Dan Roxy was silent. Danielle listened for the hum of the phone line to make sure he hadn't hung up on her.

"I can't pay that kind of advance. You know that."

"Then I guess I'll have to look somewhere else."

"Wait just a minute. I know that you're most likely going on instructions from the client. But Danielle, be reasonable. A hundred grand? Jesus Christ, that would kill my entire cash flow."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Dan."

"Hold on just a damn minute! *Scream Books* has been very good to both you and Caulder. The new book is good, but it is certainly no reason to go elsewhere. Hell, if it wasn't for *Scream*, no one would have ever heard of Caulder. While he's a long way from being a household name, with *Scream* behind him, he'll have a long career. But I think it's real early in the game for you and he to be playing negotiator, don't you? His second book hasn't even been released yet, for crying out loud. Sure, this first one's doing fine. But who

knows, the second could flop. And who knows, you might not even be able to get five thousand for this one, much less what I'm offering you now."

"You could be right. But I have a feeling that the second book is going to go very well. Very well, indeed. As a matter of fact, I sold the film rights to *The Killing Field* to Lion's Gate two days after Christmas. It's going to be a direct to DVD movie, but I'm sure that with Lion's distribution and reputation for horror films, plenty of people will see it. According to the producer they've got on the contract, it should be in stores by the time *From the Ashes* is on the shelves."

"You sold the film rights? Not just an option?"

"The whole kit and caboodle, as they say."

"You never thought about telling me?"

"Listen, Dan. You own North American print rights. That's it. Nothing else. All subsidiaries remain with Robert. I had planned to let you know before the book cover was completed. You know, so you'd have time to put a nice little blurb across it."

"Danielle, I never knew you were this goddamn hard." Roxy sounded almost defeated. Almost, but not quite. "I'll tell you what. I like you and I like Rob. I'll up the offer to fifty thousand. And that's it. Not a penny more."

"As it happens, Dan, I've sent the book out to several more publishers. I've set January 26<sup>th</sup> as an auction date. If you're interested, I'll gladly let your fifty stand as a floor bid."

"A floor bid. A floor bid, you say? Well fuck that and fuck you. When you don't get a dime for it, you'll be begging me to publish it."

"I just don't think so. Anyway, you're still welcome to give me a call before the auction if you'd like to up the price."

"I just don't believe this," Roxy said. His voice was softer now, defeat a very real thing. "Think about what you're doing. You could be ruining this young boy's career. Not to mention my reputation."

"I hardly think so. Besides, I approached you with a multi-book deal from the very beginning. It was yours to take or leave, remember? You left it."

"All right, all right. But don't forget this, Danielle Greer. If you bomb out at the auction, you can forget about crawling back to *Scream*. I'll never buy another thing from you, no matter what. I don't care if you've got the next Stephen King or John Grisham."

"King? Grisham? Big names you like to throw around there, Dan. But believe me when I tell you Caulder *is* the next big name. Goodbye."

She slammed the receiver down on its base and smiled.

Damn, it felt good to play hardball.

~ \* ~

While Danielle Greer was busy handling his professional career, Rob was struggling with his personal life—in a big way. It was now as if he and Ellen were no closer than acquaintances and neither of them made any effort to repair that drift.

Rob, when he wasn't working, came home later and later. On the days he did work, he left much earlier than was called for. At first, he did his best to hide the perfume, the makeup smudges, and the stray hairs that worked their way onto his clothing. But after a while, he gave up. He didn't know whether Ellen no longer cared, or if she didn't.

Christmas and New Years came and went. The days of January were adding up.

So was the Caulder bank account. While the movie deal for *The Killing Field* did not make him rich, or even well off, the money was welcomed. He'd paid off both his Jeep and Ellen's car with the advance for *Ashes* as well as their credit cards and some small personal loans. Now, the check from Hollywood was all extra spending money. And spend it he did.

The movie rights hadn't gone for a spectacular sum, but he and Danielle wrangled one concession from the deal. Rob's name would be included in the title. The movie was scheduled to begin production on February 1<sup>st</sup> and, according to the tentative schedule that had been relayed to him, they estimated that the entire shoot would be completed in just under a month. That was a remarkably short time for a movie, even for one intended for a straight-to-video release. But speed was of the essence. Lion's Gate was one of the

pioneers of the rejuvenated horror movie but was quickly being left behind by bigger studios. Just like *Scream Books* when they'd purchased his first book, they were hungry for a good product.

A screenwriter was assigned, but Rob was fairly certain the original story would be butchered. Hell, that was life. What could he say? They paid him for his book; he supposed they could do with it as they wished.

Regardless, the money allowed Rob to do as he wished. He bought a Sony laptop and often wrote at the coffee shop downtown when Ellen was at home. The Blue Mountain coffee with a shot of espresso went well with the image of a successful writer.

He slowed down on the pills, though he still took at least one a day. His new drug of choice was marijuana, which filled him with a pleasant, numbing calm, a feeling of intense peace. While the reprieve from the war inside his head was, needless to say, only temporary, it was a reprieve nonetheless.

He visited Rachel several more times, but met more women. The newspaper did another story on him when the rights sold to *Lion's Gate*. The article turned him into something of a local celebrity. People spoke to him everywhere he went. The girl at the gas station, the guy at the pizza place and, of course, Rio.

Rio was no older than twenty-three, probably no older than twenty-two. A student at nearby Northeast Mississippi Community College, she worked weekends at *The Java Joe*, the coffee shop that Rob frequented. Tall, slim, she had a look about her that made men of all ages, and even some women, stop and admire. She was much more clean-cut than Rachel and some of the club girls. But the sex was just as wild, just as animalistic.

They often took a room at the *Crossroads Inn* on Saturday nights. They even had a preferred room: 210. It overlooked the pool.

For her birthday, the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, Rob booked a room at Memphis's premier hotel, the *Peabody*. Since it also happened that her birthday fell on a Saturday, they stayed over until the next day and enjoyed the famous champagne brunch.



January 26<sup>th</sup> was cold and rainy in Ivy Springs, a perfect day to stay indoors. With Ellen at work, Rob had the entire house to himself as he waited patiently by the phone for the results of the book auction Danielle was holding today.

His agent called at eight o'clock his time to tell him that six publishers were involved with the auction. They were all big names and Rob was familiar with them all. He was slightly disappointed that Scream Books and Dan Roxy weren't participating, but he'd expected that.

By ten, Rob was pacing the floor in the living room.

When the phone hadn't rung by half past eleven, Rob lit a joint and smoked it while he watched a rerun of *The Twilight Zone* on the Sci-Fi Channel. He was pleasantly toasted when the phone did ring.

"Hello," he said, the marijuana not disguising the excitement in his voice. It took all of fifteen seconds for him to realize the caller was not Danielle Greer from New York City but a telemarketer trying to get him to switch from his long-distance carrier to the one she represented. After several profane words, he hung up.

The phone rang not ten seconds later.

"Listen, lady," Rob said, "I don't want your fucking long-distance service."

"Robert?" the female voice asked.

"Oh, uh, Ms. Greer, I'm sorry about that. I'm having telemarketer problems this morning." She laughed and Rob did his best to read something from the sound. If there were something there, however, the Thai stick was clouding his insight. "You've got news?"

"Yes. I do." She dragged the words out so they seemed that they lasted a small eternity. "As I said before, I sent out ten manuscripts of the novel. Six houses bit. All have very deep pockets. Still, I must say that regardless of the seemingly renewed interest in dark fantasy, it's still a hard sell. People with deep pockets like these fellas didn't get them from putting out books that don't sell."

Rob wanted to tell her to stop beating around the bush and get to the point already. It wasn't a sense of politeness that kept him from doing so, but a fear of what she was leading up to.

"Knopf puts out Anne Rice, and has put out Dean Koontz as have Bantam and Putnam. William Morrow just released Joe Hill's *Heart-Shaped Box* and Doubleday was, after all, Stephen King's first publisher. So, while not adverse to horror, it's got to be top of the line.

"The floor bid was fifty-thousand. As I said earlier, that's a bit high. But, if you'll recall, that was your number."

*Here we go, we blew it, and it's all my fault,* Rob thought to himself. Still, his lips did not part and he was breathing heavily through his nostrils.

"There was a tad bit more interest than I had expected. Especially from such large publishers. I'm torturing you, aren't I?"

"Yes, a whole lot," Rob admitted.

"Well, the book sold. So have no worries."

"It did?" Rob felt like jumping up and down. For his novel to be put out by such large publishers would almost guarantee a big print run. Even if the advance wasn't all that high, surely he'd make a killing in royalties. "Who bought it?"

"Jonathon Bennet purchased it about twenty-five minutes ago."

"Oh my God," Rob muttered. Jonathon Bennet was the crown king of Publishers' Row, a virtual book mill. "That's wonderful! Thank you so very much, Danielle."

"Don't you want to know how much?"

"How much?" Rob asked. "How much what?"

"Rob, have you been drinking this morning?" It was a joke, he realized. If only she knew the truth.

"No, ma'am."

"By how much, I mean how much of an advance you're getting."

Nervous laughter on Rob's part. "Oh, yeah. Please, tell me."

"First, let me say this. If you were able to quit your job and write full-time, would that be agreeable to you?"

"Certainly."

"What if you had your book come out in hardcover, would that be good?"

"Good, that would be great."

"What if I said that you were now a millionaire?"

"That would be...what, what did you say?"

"I'm pretty sure that you heard me right, Robert Caulder. You are now a millionaire. You are now one-point-three-million dollars richer than when you woke up this morning."

Rob said nothing.

"Rob, are you still there?" She waited a moment. "Hello?"

"I-I think I'm going to be sick."

~ \* ~

It was several days later when he finally learned the details of his contract with Jonathon Bennet.

The advance was for one million, three hundred thousand dollars. *Fear of the Dark* would be published in a trade hardcover edition with a print run of 100,000 copies. Six months later, a paperback edition would be released, the print run would be evaluated after the initial hardcover release, i.e., to see if the book sinks or swims.

The book was slated to be in stores by this coming December. Several of the book clubs would be queried to see if the title could be carried as an alternate selection of the month, the main selections being reserved for brand name authors. A promotional tour would be launched a week prior to the book's release. As many radio stations and television shows as possible would be approached. The publisher would also take over management and operation of [www.robertcaulder.com](http://www.robertcaulder.com).

When the book was released, a signing tour would be initiated and, at the publisher's expense, Robert would be required to visit an, as yet, undetermined number of bookstores in an undetermined number of cities.

All in all, Danielle told him, he had arrived.

After all that had a chance to sink in, he was inclined to agree.

Even though his and Ellen's relationship was continuing its downward spiral, he thought of her and decided to do something nice.

Ellen greeted the news of the money much the way she reacted anytime Rob spoke to her. A nod and a faraway look. "That's good, Robert," she'd said. For the first time he wondered if she might be on Prozac or Xanax. But he didn't ask. After everything that had happened, he knew, rightly,

that it was no longer any of his business.

Several weeks ago they started sleeping in separate rooms, making love one single time since January 1<sup>st</sup>. That time had been devoid of the tiniest amount of love, simply an act, a relief of built-up pressure...at least for Ellen. Rob, for his part, was doing just fine relieving his built-up pressure.

So, after the check arrived and he deposited it into a new bank account, one in his name only, he also set up a fund for Ellen, with a balance of two hundred thousand dollars. When that business was taken care of, he called a cab to pick him up at home and deliver him to the dealership in town. He selected a brand new pewter Land Rover for Ellen with all the options he thought she'd want. He paid for the truck with cash and drove it home. He parked it in the drive and took the key inside. He wrote his wife a short letter, folded it and placed it with the ignition key and keyless entry fob into an envelope with his wife's name written across it in large letters.

He checked his watch and found he had several hours left before Ellen got off work. Still, he'd have to hurry.

He packed two suitcases and several cardboard cartons. He took clothes, books, and his laptop. The only photo he took was of him and Ellen several months before they were married, when they were happy and in love. With one another.

In the closet, he took down his uniforms. He'd given a two-day notice, but his boss was an asshole and uncooperative. He took the security guard outfits out to the back porch, laid them flat across the planks, and unzipped his fly. The stream of urine was yellowish in the early afternoon sun. When he finished, the white shirts were stained like a smoker's teeth and the beige pants, dark.

He walked around the house, looking at every room. He stepped into what was now Ellen's bedroom, what had once been their bedroom, and breathed in the aroma of her, the scent of her, the essence of her. For so long, Ellen had been home for him, the smell of her welcoming. Now, it embarrassed him. Embarrassed him because he knew he'd betrayed her. And more than once.

Then he loaded the Jeep, found the road atlas that

he'd purchased at the pharmacy, started the engine, and drove away.

He never came home again.

~ \* ~

Ellen Caulder came home later that afternoon and found the new SUV sparkling in the weak winter sun.

Inside, she found the note. She wanted to cry, *needed* to cry. But no tears would come. Rob's leaving had been a long time in the making; she'd known that for a while.

Secretly, she was relieved.

She still loved him. There was never any doubt of that. Or rather she loved the man he had been until last year. The kind, compassionate, loving man.

But his books changed all that. Probably forever.

She did not love the man he had become.

In truth, she hated that Robert Caulder. The new man that replaced her husband was a jerk, a womanizer, a bastard.

She would miss her husband no more than she had last night and this morning and each night and every morning before that. She'd missed him for a very long time. But this new person, this morphed human being, she would not miss at all.

She left the kitchen and walked into the living room. She switched on the TV with the remote and took a seat in a chair. For the first time in a long time, she felt alright. Not good, not great, but alright.

## ***Eleven***

Months passed with slow surety.

Summer came with the release of his second novel. While Dan Roxy cursed his name, *Scream* still owned *From the Ashes* and they promoted it and placed it well. They still had a lot invested in it and were determined to make a profit.

The numbers for *Killing Field* were still strong and from early indications, the second book was set to surpass those sales.

But, Rob knew that was just the tip of the iceberg. He watched the calendar closely, waiting for December and his rise in stature when Jonathon Bennet released *Fear*.

Already there was a big buzz in the trade publications. *Publisher's Weekly* had run a cover story on him and his million-dollar advance. Hollywood had already bought the rights to *Ashes* and even this far from publication, there were nibbles on *Fear*.

Of course, Lion's Gate had a lot to do with that. In a fortunate turn of events, there had been a gap in the studio's summer theatrical releases. Some type of legal issue or another. *The Killing Field* was the only finished film that fit. While it was made on a five million dollar budget with an unknown cast, it was number two at the box office for its second straight week, and already earned close to twenty-million worldwide. Not a blockbuster by any stretch, but a very good return on such a small investment. When it was decided the film would be released to theaters, a new contract was generated. Rob's final take from *The Killing Field* the movie was three times what he'd initially been paid.

*Ashes* went for twice that.

He bought himself a small cabin in the Colorado Mountains. During the summer months, it was easy enough to get back and forth to Aspen, especially with the purchase of his yellow Hummer.

The cabin was simple. Outfitted like a hunting lodge. Two bedrooms, a large den, and a sizeable bonus room that Rob transformed into a very comfortable writing studio. He had a large oak desk where his computer and flat-screen monitor sat supreme. Covers from his two novels and related magazine and newspaper articles graced one wall in large, stainless steel frames. Another wall held a hulking, custom bookcase the same oak as the desk. A window ran the length of the exterior wall, the desk far enough from it so that Rob could sit behind it and face inward as he worked. He could swivel around for a view of the vast mountains that slashed across the sky.

By the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, Rob learned the surrounding area well enough and had made a few acquaintances. But for the most part he was a recluse, churning out four new books by the time Thanksgiving rolled around. While the new novels wouldn't be published for a while, he was beginning to fear that one day he would wake up and find that his special gift had deserted him. So, he wrote as much as he could, intending to write enough to keep him financially secure as long as possible. He stored hard copies of the manuscripts in a fire-proof safe in his studio as well as in a safety deposit box in town. He saved them electronically on his hard drive, CDs, and a flash drive. He also created a secure email account with his Internet provider and stored the finished copies in cyberspace.

Perhaps he was a bit obsessive, but he would much rather err on the side of caution than to have the books come up missing, or even worse, stolen.

He talked to his mother only twice since the move. He hadn't talked to Ellen once. All their communication had been by way of a divorce lawyer in Ivy Springs. Six months after Rob filed, the divorce was official. Surprisingly, his wife hadn't wanted anything from him. Not half of his accrued wealth, not a stiff alimony payment, not even a fuck you.

Something in Rob refused to leave her high and dry.

Though he had no direct access to the account he'd set up for her, he still had the account number and monitored the balance weekly. He deposited twenty-five thousand dollars a month.

While he was a bit lonely at times, Rob used his time constructively. He still had nightmares and he consumed a steady intake of prescription pills and street drugs to deaden his mind to the worst of them. While sleep was always an effort, he still managed four or five hours a night. He often considered how easy it was to buy the illegal substances that kept him sane. All you had to have was money, or even a reputation of having it, and the pushers found *you*, not the other way around.

He occasionally spoke to Danielle Greer and his editor at Jonathon Bennet, Emmitt Krutcher. Other than that, Rob only made contact with the world outside his little slice of Colorado for phone interviews and email.

It hadn't taken long to fall into a slow, lulling routine. He woke about eight in the morning and made breakfast. While the cabin was rustic, it possessed state of the art appliances in the kitchen and meal preparation was a simple joy. After breakfast, he sipped a couple cups of coffee and read out on the deck if the weather was agreeable. After an hour or so, he went to work. He allowed the words to flow until late afternoon. After he finished his day's work he made a large supper, and then settled in the den in a large chair and watched movies on the LCD television. By seven or eight, he was usually wasted and was often in bed by eleven.

He also discovered a nice little place where he'd take a drink or two on Friday and Saturday nights. The small but busy bar, Halton's, attracted both tourists and locals. On any given weekend night, a man with a decent face and money in his pockets would have no trouble taking an attractive woman home for the night.

Rob met many companions this way. He mostly went for tourists, if he could. After a night or two of sex, they would be gone and there would be none of the messy trappings of either affection or false commitment.

But with the first of the big holidays coming, he didn't feel like being alone.

His mother called and left a message on his machine,



inviting him home for Thanksgiving dinner.

Rob never called her back.

~ \* ~

"The food looks wonderful," she said. Her name was Perri Shane, and with her fiery red hair and fair skin, she obviously boasted some Irish ancestry. At twenty-nine, she was the oldest of Rob's "new friends" in the community, but she had the body of a twenty-year-old fashion model. She had high, delicate cheekbones, a regal, thin nose, a powerful body toned by aerobics and routine skiing. Her clear green eyes sparkled with intelligence and her luscious lips had an adorable perpetual pout. Perri, recently divorced, used the settlement money to buy a ski chalet. For now, she wanted nothing but a good time and a good ride. Rob liked that very, very much.

"Thank you." Rob sipped from a goblet of chardonnay. While he still wasn't much of a drinker, he had developed a taste for good wine and found it went well with a respectable meal.

On the table, a feast spread out before them, waiting to be devoured. The roasted turkey was a deep, golden brown. English peas, creamed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and giblet gravy steamed from their respective plates, platters, and bowls. Thick slabs of butter melted on freshly baked sourdough rolls. In the adjacent den, a fire roared and lent a smoky, hickory ambiance to the cabin.

"You leave Saturday?"

"Yep, my flight leaves at ten in the morning." *Fear* was to be released in less than two weeks, on December 13<sup>th</sup>, a Tuesday. The publisher was throwing a release party for the novel at a swanky hotel in New York City Saturday night and, of course, Rob was the guest of honor. Then Monday began a busy week of radio interviews and a few local morning shows. The day of *Fear's* release, Rob had a book signing event at the Manhattan Barnes and Noble. For the next thirty-odd days, he would travel to major cities like Chicago, Minneapolis, Memphis, Miami, Birmingham, Tampa, Miami, Austin, Dallas, Kansas City, and finally end up in Los Angeles by the second week of January for a total of forty-two signings. He was scheduled for a few more radio interviews along the way and more would probably be added. Even

though he was traveling over Christmas, he was extremely excited about the tour.

"So, you need to be in bed early, huh?"

"Well, I'm sure I'll manage." He winked. She blushed and looked down at her plate, smiling.

During their meal, they made small talk, discussing the weather, movies, music. While Perri wasn't a big reader, she'd read *The Killing Field* and said she'd enjoyed it immensely. As a matter of fact, that's all he'd heard about it: good things. Reviews for both it and *Ashes* were excellent and even *People* gave him an exceptional review back in August.

They finished their dessert of egg custard pie and Rob stood to refill Perri's wineglass. She was dressed in a thick wool sweater and corduroy slacks. While the attire might've been less flattering on anyone else, Perri could make a burlap sack look sexy. Her every move spawned erotic impulses.

She grabbed his arm as he placed the bottle of wine back on the table. She brought his hand to her mouth and pushed his index finger over her lips. Her mouth was a steamy hole and Rob felt himself stir to attention.

"Would you like to tuck me in tonight?" he asked.

Perri smiled her famous fuck-me-I'm-yours smile and stood up against him. Rob didn't know the name of her perfume, but was quite sure it was expensive, as was her style. Fortunately, it was worth every single cent.

From the kitchen they made their way to the bedroom, caressing and stroking each other with every step.

A small fire blazed in Rob's bedroom fireplace. In the light of the flames, Perri undressed. Basked in the reds and oranges of the flames, her body was magnificent and extravagant. This Irish woman was far superior to the hot women he bedded last year.

Perri lay back on the bed, waiting for Rob. He unbuttoned his pants and yanked his shirt off over his head. He took a running leap onto the bed, his knees and hands falling on either side of her. "Come on Mr. Scary Man," she said. "Make me shiver."

The sex lasted for a long time and when they finished, both drifted off to sleep as a chilling wind howled over the

eaves and pure white snow fell from the heavens.

~ \* ~

Rob was in New York by late afternoon. And though he wished he could see the "city that never sleeps" from above at night, the huge metropolis was still awesome, even shrouded in smog and seen through icy rain.

Rob's editor had not chartered a limousine to take him to his hotel and finding a taxi wasn't easy. But finally, after two hours at the airport, he was on his way thru the hustle and bustle of New York. He'd seen the Statue of Liberty from the air, but hoped to get a chance to see Times Square and Madison Square Garden sometime within the next week.

He paid the cabbie and tipped him well when he was dropped at his hotel. He had a suite waiting in his name. A bellhop in a maroon uniform with tassels on the lapels placed his luggage on a cart and escorted him to his room. The room was extravagant, to say the least. While he knew not to expect such grand accommodations for the duration of his upcoming tour, he was fully prepared to enjoy his stay here in grand style.

He had two hours before the party in the ballroom downstairs. He'd caught a quick nap on the flight and decided to go ahead and shower. He'd purchased a tuxedo for the occasion and after he showered, he took his time dressing.

He looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He'd never thought of himself as handsome, but neither did he think himself grotesque. He was just shy of six feet, with an average build. During his time in semi-exile at the cabin, exposed to healthy meals and very little stress, he'd shed a few inches and was now a tad on the slim side. While in Colorado he'd grown his hair long and had even grown a beard. But, just before this trip, he had his dishwater blond hair trimmed short and shaved away all facial hair.

His eyes were a deep blue, the color of a darkening summer sky. His teeth were straight and white, their perfection due to two years in braces rather than a gift of nature. He played baseball in high school, but hadn't been all that physically active since, but still, he was in good shape.

A reporter for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* likened Rob to a Hollywood leading man and, although he really

didn't see it, he enjoyed the flattery.

By the time he was dressed and ready, he had less than fifteen minutes before he was to meet Danielle in the lobby. He was more than a little nervous at the prospect of meeting his agent face to face. Even though they had talked and written each other for quite a while now, meeting in person was a horse of a different color.

"Okay, Robert Caulder," he said to the man in the mirror. "It's time to shine."

He found Danielle Greer waiting by the fountain downstairs. He didn't exactly know what he'd expected, but this wasn't it. While he did his best not to prejudge the woman, he was guilty of thinking she would look wormy or perhaps overweight, a thirty-something with thick glasses and a bad complexion. He'd reached this preconceived notion due to the fact that the only agent, or former agent, he'd ever met, was his English Composition professor at the University of Mississippi, Mrs. Aster. She was perhaps in her fifties and it took just one look to know that she'd never been what he'd call attractive. She'd worn black horn rimmed glasses and her hair was stringy and always uncombed. She favored sweater vests and long, khaki skirts. A mole on her right cheek always seemed to sprout hair. From the day she told his class that she'd worked for a small literary agency before getting her doctorate in English, Rob had always assigned the image of Mrs. Aster to every female literary agent.

Danielle Greer was nothing like Mrs. Aster.

She was slim, almost to the point of being too thin, but not quite. Lustrous brown hair framed a fragile looking face. He recognized her by her dress. She'd described it to him on the phone last week. She had not been complete in her description.

It was a red dress with sequined sleeves with a slit that ran up her right thigh. Small spirals of hair ran parallel to her neck, barely touching her bare shoulder. Her shoes matched the fabric of the dress perfectly and the heel was only an inch high. Dark, sheer hose covered her legs. The dress came to her knees but the partial pair of legs left exposed was straight and sleek and enticing.

Rob stepped up to her as she watched water trickle

down from the top of the fountain. "Ms. Greer," he said as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

She turned and looked at him. "Rob? Rob Caulder?" She studied him as if matching him with a description in her mind.

"Yes, ma'am." He extended his hand and she took it.

"I'm glad to finally meet you after all this time."

"Likewise."

She gestured toward the fountain. "I noticed the fountain on my way in. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm usually not a fan of abstract sculpture, but this did catch my eye." Rob eyed the fountain. The centerpiece from which the water originated looked like a cross between the beak of an eagle and a glob of slime. Perhaps not an articulate evaluation, but that was all he could think of. And while he had noticed the fountain on the way in, he thought it one of the ugliest things he'd ever had the misfortune to see, but he wasn't about to tell Danielle.

"Well, Rob, how does it feel to be the man of the hour?" she asked as they walked toward the main banquet room.

"As of right now, just like swallowing a handful of razor blades, but it'll probably get much worse as the evening progresses."

She laughed, the music of it just like over the phone lines. Danielle squeezed his hand once as they stepped through the door. The banquet hall was brimming with people and many were still entering. Round tables with white tablecloths and flowered centerpieces dotted the room. At the head of the hall was a small stage and podium. Behind the stage, hanging from ceiling to floor was a poster of the front cover of *Fear of the Dark*. At the rear of the hall a buffet had been set up and servers in white tuxedos and white dresses made their way through the crowd carrying large round trays.

Rob followed Danielle as she started toward the front. He kept his head low, averting the eyes of the strangers. But, of course, they weren't really strangers. They were here for him, to celebrate his accomplishment. Either that, or the free meal courtesy of Jonathon Bennet Publishing.

"Rob," Danielle said as they approached a tall man in a

well-cut suit. His salt and pepper hair and tanned skin reminded him of a weekend sailboat captain. "I'd like you to meet your editor, Emmitt Krutcher."

The editor extended his hand and Rob took it, surprised at the senior's grip. "It's truly a pleasure, Mr. Krutcher. I owe you a good deal."

"Robert Caulder, if America and the rest of the world think as much of your book as I do, then consider that debt paid in full."

"For my sake as well as yours," Rob laughed, albeit nervously, "I hope the same."

"If you'll excuse us for moment, Emmitt, I'd like to introduce our bright new star to a few more people."

"Of course, Danielle, but remember, I've got you both a seat at my table." Emmitt then took Danielle's hand and kissed it. It seemed innocent enough, but Rob felt a tinge of jealousy. Why, he didn't know.

"Follow me, Rob. The best and brightest of the New York literary world, await you."

~ \* ~

It took Danielle and Rob a little over an hour and a half to make the rounds. Rob was introduced to a slew of Bennet writers that turned out for the launch of *Fear*, as well as reporters for several prominent newspapers, including a contributing writer for the New York Times Book Review. There were several representatives from the large chain booksellers and some brass from the book clubs as well.

Though the new novel hadn't been selected as a main choice this time, the fact that it had been selected as an alternative spoke very, very well for it. Or so many people told him.

Rob met more people and heard more names than he would ever be able to recall. This type of socializing was completely foreign to him and it didn't come easy. Fortunately, Danielle seemed to recognize this. She was quick to smile at him and offer a wink of encouragement from time to time.

After all the elbow rubbing and hob-knobbing was complete, the buffet opened and droves of people made their way toward it. Rob had very little appetite.

The champagne, however, was cold and good. He

used it to secretly down a few Valium on the sly before taking his seat at Krutcher's table, along with Danielle, a VP from Bennet's, a reviewer from Kirkus, and Krutcher's wife, Camille, a wonderfully aristocratic woman with superb diction and expensive jewelry.

So as to not appear rude, Rob piled some food onto a plate and stabbed at it occasionally.

When the majority of those present had finished their meal, Emmitt Krutcher wiped his mouth with a linen napkin, excused himself, and made his way to the podium.

Krutcher tapped the microphone, making sure it was switched on. He cleared his throat. "Good evening, ladies, and gentlemen," he said. "I'd like to begin by expressing my appreciation to you all for attending this event. We've gathered on this cold Saturday evening to celebrate the release of a novel by a young man that, by all indications, will have a long, bright future with Jonathon Bennet...Robert Caulder." He paused as the room clapped.

The warmth rose in Rob's cheeks and he took another pull from his glass.

"Now, I know some of you have received your advance copies of *Fear of the Dark*. I must say that I'm not known to publish works of such dark, macabre fiction. However, if you've taken the time to read your *free* advance copy of the book..." Krutcher paused again as laughter rippled through the crowd. "Then you'll agree that I would have been a fool not to jump on this book. While the story is sinister and frightening, it is also compelling and intriguing. However, it is not only the plot of this novel, but the writing of this gloomy world that kept me turning pages long into the night, with the occasional glance over my shoulder, mind you." Again, laughter and a few nod of heads as if, yes, they knew exactly what he was talking about.

"But, this night is not about me or my thoughts on Mr. Caulder. The night is about Mr. Caulder and his exceptional project. Also, I have very few copies of the book available. The servers will begin passing out folded cards. Each card will have on it a number. If your number is selected, you will receive a free copy. And if Mr. Caulder is agreeable, perhaps you might have it signed this evening."

Surprised, Rob nodded his head.

"Then, ladies and gentlemen, without further adieu, Mr. Robert Caulder." The room erupted into loud, jubilant, applause. Rob swallowed hard. Danielle reached for his hand and squeezed it. He stood and walked toward the stage, then up the three steps onto it.

Krutcher shook his hand, and left him there. A simple man from the south faced a room full of Yankees.

He waited for the crowd to quiet. He had no idea what he was going to say. He wasn't prepared to make a speech and he was not a gifted orator.

He rubbed his hands together. "To say that I'm thrilled to be here would be an understatement. I...uh..." Words left him and he was aware of all the sets of eyes staring directly at him, almost through him. His throat constricted and his heartbeat thundered in his chest. He counted slowly back from five.

The room was silent. Not a single cough or clearing of the throat.

A slow panic unfurled itself like bat's wings in his mind.

Then, Rob closed his eyes as his mind groped for words, pleading for them.

After taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes. Danielle and Krutcher smiled at him, the looks in their eyes willing him to continue. Not a hateful command, as if they feared this was all a mistake. That Robert Caulder of Ivy Springs, Mississippi, should have *stayed* in Ivy Springs, Mississippi. That all of this was a huge waste of time and he should either shit or get off the pot.

No, there was nothing but goodwill from them, especially Danielle, and somehow he found courage.

Another heartbeat and the words finally came.

"I've wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember," he began, slightly stunned at the confidence in his own voice. "Not to say that I've always *been* a writer, mind you. For a long time, I simply read. I read and dreamed that it was my name on the covers of those books. The books that allowed me to visit strange and wonderful worlds. The very first book I recall reading from cover to cover was *Salem's Lot* by Stephen King." That was a lie; in fact the first book he'd ever read was a Golden Book for



preschoolers. He had not read a single line of Stephen King until last year, but that wasn't important at the moment. "From then on out, I had what you might call a fascination for the dark, a love affair for things that go bump in the night. I fantasized about my own characters, my own stories, my own worlds. But, for a while, that's all that I did. I thought about it. A hell of a way to kill time, let me tell you. But not much good for anything else.

"Then I came up with a solution. An incredible idea, or so I thought at the time. To be a writer, all I had to do was to write. Novel, huh?" He paused for a moment and was rewarded by guarded laughter. It was a nice little incentive. "Well, that's exactly what I did. I got me a nice little spiral bound notebook and a fresh pack of Bics, and away I went. I wrote a nice little story, the name escapes me at the moment, I'm afraid, and I thought I was in business.

"Boy, was I wrong." This time the laughter wasn't nearly as guarded.

"Nonetheless, though my first stories were chock full of errors and tired themes, pretty much a rehash of what I'd read, I found that I was a glutton for punishment and continued on. Now, all these years later, here I am.

"Along the way someone did stop and ask me why I wanted to be a writer. Well, I thought about that for a while. The only answer I could come up with was, why not? Seems like a perfectly noble profession to me. Not nearly as important as a doctor, or teacher, soldier, or plumber. If you've ever had a backed up toilet you know just what I mean. But being a writer seemed a lot better than being a lawyer or a politician. When you look back over the words that you labored to bring to life, there's a sense of accomplishment unlike any other. By writing books I share something of myself with the world. Dark secrets and new beginnings. It's hard to explain," he said. "So I'll just show you."

There was one copy of *Fear of the Dark* on a shelf on the inside of the podium. Rob picked it up and held it so that the audience could see it. "This, my friends, is what I'm about." He opened the book, cleared his throat, turned to the first chapter, and began to read:

*"Justin Reynolds was afraid of the dark. To him, the*

*absence of light was a hateful scourge of some higher being who had long ago given up hope in mankind. But Justin not only feared the darkness, he loathed it. For, you see, in the darkness blood is unseen, lacking its red ruby color, the color that Justin has, for the last several years, grown to need. Not like a mythical vampire. He does not suck the blood, drinking in its life-giving properties. Rather, he enjoys the splatter of it across white walls, the heat of it as it spurts, river-like, from a torn vein.*

*You, see, Justin Reynolds is a killer; some would call him a madman. This is his story and it must be told..."*

When Rob finished the first chapter, he closed the book.

An awful quiet gripped the room, so intense that slamming the cover shut on the book sounded like thunder. It lasted more seconds than he cared to count.

Then, Danielle Greer stood up from her seat and began to clap. Emmitt Krutcher and his wife did the same. The rest of the crowd followed suit and as Rob stepped down from the stage he knew that this would not be the last time he felt the sweet taste of success.

## ***Twelve***

By quarter till eleven, the guests at Rob's release party began to dwindle, and by eleven sharp there were less than five left. After his reading of the first chapter, the atmosphere changed considerably. No longer did people's eyes linger longer on Danielle than on him when they spoke, though, admittedly, Rob's stayed more on his agent now than before.

Danielle looked tired and he knew she was about to beg off. Emmitt Krutcher was still in attendance, though his focus was on caring for his more than slightly inebriated wife, who Rob now saw to be several years his junior.

"It's been a really good night."

"Yes, it has. Your reading went wonderfully. Y'know, Bennet bought the audio rights, the CD's will be released a week after the book. But for your next novel, you should think about recording the story yourself."

"That's a thought." Truthfully, he detested the thought of spending hour upon hour in a recording studio getting his words just right on tape, and he was worried about his accent, as well. He never realized just how much he sounded like a country bumpkin, not until he was thrust into a room full of New Yorkers. Several people commented on it, but never in a negative way. The women, it seemed, truly enjoyed hearing him talk, but it was still something he needed to work on. He was already the new kid on the block; he didn't want to compound his uphill journey with more differences than necessary. Perhaps it wouldn't do to lose the southern accent entirely, just soften it a bit. Sound like folks in the John Grisham movies, the smart ones, lawyers and

such, not the criminals.

"I want to thank you for everything you've done, Danielle."

She looked at him for a moment, studying his face. She'd consumed her fair share of champagne, and her eyes were having just the tiniest bit of difficulty focusing. "You're very welcome, Robert Caulder. But, y'know, you did the hard part: writing the book. The stuff you write is remarkably easy to sell."

They sat in silence for a moment, looking toward the back of the room, near the buffet where Emmitt and his younger wife danced. Though no music played, the two swayed to music that only they could hear.

"He loves her," Rob said.

Danielle watched the scene a moment longer. "I suppose he does."

Rob reached his hand out toward Danielle's, who quickly pulled hers away. Rob acted as if he hadn't noticed. "I think it's time for me to be heading home," she said.

"Are you okay to drive?"

"Probably not. Luckily, I'm taking a taxi."

"Let me walk you out." Danielle appeared to hesitate. "Please," he said. "It's the least I could do."

"Okay."

~ \* ~

They walked side by side out of the ballroom, each in step with the other. When they passed the fountain, Rob caught her eyes cutting to it.

"Again, I'd like to say thank you for everything."

"And again, Mr. Caulder, I must tell you that the hard part was yours." She smiled as she spoke.

"You know, you weren't exactly what I was expecting."

She slowed, but did not stop, and looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a little embarrassed to say...but...I had a preconceived notion of literary agents."

"Thick glasses, school marm dresses, and the face that only a mother could love?"

"Yeah," he said and grinned. "And for some reason I thought that you'd be older, decades older."

"You'll be glad to know, then, that I am no spring

chicken. However, when reading, I do wear glasses, but the lenses are not Coke bottle thick."

"I am delightfully surprised," he said with a smirk.

"Listen, would you like to get a cup of coffee, or perhaps a night cap?"

She did stop then, and turned to him. Her eyes were deep and powerful, and her lips curled slightly at the edges. Rob knew, at that very moment, that this woman had the strength and grace to win in this life, to truly win. Her gaze commanded immediate respect, her presence and aura demanded complete devotion. He wanted to give her both.

"Rob, I don't know exactly how to say this."

"Say what?"

"I've been getting signals from you all night. You're a very, very attractive man, you truly are. You're bright, intelligent, gifted, and very talented. You're also my biggest client. Your first book was my first independent sell. I will make no secret that I feel a beginning of an attraction toward you. But there's no way I would ever be able to follow it up. It's poor business. You're barely divorced and I'm coming out of a very, very bad relationship. I think it would be best if we kept things on a friendly, but professional level."

Rob thought for a moment, considering her words. Then he grinned. "You tell all that to everyone who walks you out for a cab?"

He could tell his nonplussed remark relaxed her and he was glad of that. Outside, the doorman hailed a taxi. Rain still fell, albeit a fine mist. The night was infinite, even the blazing lights all around offered hope of future promise.

Ignoring the doorman, Rob opened the door for her when the yellow cab pulled to a stop. "You be careful, Ma'am. And don't forget, you promised me a tour of the city. After all, I am your biggest client."

"Yes, Rob, I did and you are. I'll see you tomorrow."

He waved as the car pulled away. Rob nodded to the doorman and tipped him a ten.

He passed his editor with his wife as he walked back in, but they were in their own world. The man never even saw Rob. He stopped by the ballroom; the servers were clearing the buffet. He wandered about for approximately

five minutes, looked at the poster, thought about his speech, and then headed up to his suite.

~ \* ~

Rob let himself into his room, which was deathly silent. He switched on the TV for background noise and stepped into the bathroom. He opened his toiletry bag, full of a multitude of brown bottles. He'd amassed quite a collection of prescriptions over the last year. A number of doctors were more than willing to prescribe whatever he wanted. It would've been scary if it weren't so comforting.

He pulled out two bottles, shook one pill from each. He filled a plastic cup with tap water and swallowed them.

He left the bathroom, turning the light off as he went. He walked to the large window and looked out over the bright city. His room was high enough to see the awe that was New York City spread out before him, but not so high that it looked removed and unreal. He'd heard someone say once that if you could make it here, you could make it anywhere.

He stared out the window for a long while. A few minutes passed before he realized that he was rubbing his thumb gently over a finger, the finger that had once held his wedding band.

His laptop was out, sitting on a small, antique writing desk. The power was on and a screensaver was in motion. It was the cover of his new book, blood slowly pouring over it. When the entire image was red with it, the image disappeared, then reappeared and the blood began to fall again.

He went to the phone and ordered room service. A bottle of Dom Perignon and strawberries, lightly dusted with sugar. He replaced the receiver and loosened his bowtie.

There was a knock at the door.

"It's open," he said.

A serving girl from the release party stepped in. She had removed her white uniform dress and was now wearing a long-sleeve Columbia tee-shirt and tight, hip hugging jeans. She looked exactly like what she was: a college student. Though she most likely attended a city community college and not the renowned Columbia.

Her name was Bethany. She had blonde hair, cut

short. She was pretty, in a wholesome sort of way that Rob knew life would soon strip away. She was collegiate and naïve, probably played softball or basketball. Probably had two wonderful, loving parents and a slew of siblings that would be repulsed by the things Rob intended to do with her tonight.

She carried a duffel bag, probably holding her uniform.

"Hi," Rob said cheerfully, the pills weaving their magic, making him feel light, almost giddy.

"Mr. Caulder," she said. She was shy, but she'd been star struck at the party; he had spotted the look early. She probably wasn't much of a reader, but she knew all about fame, and wanted a taste of it, as did so many. Rob was not famous, but the attention on him tonight made Bethany believe that he was far more than he was.

This was just fine with him.

It hadn't taken very much convincing to get her up here. A polite invitation, a slight southern drawl, a flick of his wrist to reveal his new Rolex, and his room number.

He'd learned, since leaving Mississippi, that he had a gift for attracting women. Whether it was due to his newfound confidence, his physical appearance or what, Rob had very little trouble in finding a companion. Except in the cases of Ellen and Danielle, that is. It seemed the women he wanted most were always beyond his reach.

But that was okay for now. He would certainly make do with those he did have.

"Please, come in, make yourself comfortable. I've ordered room service. It should be up in a jiffy."

Bethany stepped further into the room, her eyes taking in the rich accommodations. "You have a spectacular suite."

"Why, thank you." He took a seat on the bed and patted the spot next to him. "Come here. You've got to feel this mattress."

She did, and when room service arrived, neither Rob nor Bethany felt inclined to answer the door.

Thanks to the miracles of modern medicine, Rob performed like a twenty-year-old for most of the night. And while Bethany was obviously inexperienced, her body was beautiful, and Rob taught her things about it that she'd

never known before.

As the night forged into early morning and beyond, Rob lost himself in ecstasy and forgot, for a while, about nightmares and lost loves, and words that never ceased to be there, always in his mind crying for liberation. All he knew was pleasure and the taste of Bethany's body.

~ \* ~

Darkness. A cold, riveting wind blew from all four cardinal directions. Not complete darkness, but a very deep gloom. He could make out the land around him, but only just.

A vast canyon. Black stone walls leading down into an even blacker chasm.

No moon in the sky, so stars pierced the velvet above.

Only a shine, a weak glow off in the distance.

Rob walked toward the light. He was afraid not to. He shivered and realized he was naked, his skin rough with gooseflesh. The white mist of his breath swirled like ghosts as it escaped him.

This was not Earth, at least not in the way he knew it. This was an alien land. A world without the sun, without the benefit of natural light. He knew, as one always does in dreams, that the growing brightness that attracted him, continually drawing him nearer and nearer, was not natural.

Of course, he didn't know *what* it was. Rob also wasn't sure he wanted to find out. But he didn't have a choice. While a part of him wished to turn tail and flee, his bare feet continued forward.

The ground beneath him was rough, a rocky ground, and cold stone crunched underfoot. Walking hurt...badly.

From a cloudless sky, rain began to fall. But it was not water that fell in piercing pellets of pain, but something else entirely.

In the gloom of this surreal world, a warm rain sluiced over him, trails of dark scarlet coating his bare skin.

Blood.

He tried to wipe the sticky fluid from his face, his arms, his chest, but only succeeded in smearing it. Then, the rain fell harder. And harder still. Blood crashed down in sheets that obstructed his already precarious view.

He looked down and found, to his horror, that he was



only inches from the canyon's lip. Had he been so transfixed by both the ghost light in the distance and the shower of blood that he'd almost dropped into a canyon that, perhaps, had no bottom? Apparently so. He swallowed hard and turned left, giving the canyon a wide berth.

The falling blood got warmer...and warmer still. After he walked another minute, still attempting to make sense of this world, the blood turned hot. So hot, in fact, it burned—even scalded—his skin.

Rob placed his hands over his head, palms up, doing his best to shield himself from the onslaught. Having placed himself a safe distance from the canyon, he moved faster, running across the sharp ground as quickly as he could tolerate.

The light up ahead was gone. Snuffed out, or lost.

The soles of his feet slapped the ground.

The hissing, bloody rain sliced into him, peppering his flesh with ragged burning holes, like craters from lit cigarettes.

Over the wind, over the hissing of the rain, he heard laughter. Sick, sadistic laughter. Robert Caulder knew that the laughter, that horrid sound, came from the light. The light that, try as he might, seemed forever beyond his reach.

Then, he realized the reason for the laughter.

He had misjudged his position. He was not, in fact, a safe distance from the cusp of the deep canyon. He must have become disoriented.

He was falling, his feet moving like Wile E. Coyote in midair.

In his descent, he knew what waited below.

Death waited.

And something much worse.

~ \* ~

Bethany was gone when Rob awoke with a start.

It was just as well, he wasn't much of a morning person and hated talking for at least an hour after rising. Especially after that nightmare.

By the time he showered and dressed it was midmorning. He checked the hotel phone to make sure he had no messages, then checked his cell.

Danielle had not yet called.

He was disappointed, but not entirely surprised.

Just as he was scrolling through his phone for her number, his phone rang. He checked the caller ID and smiled.

"Hello?"

"Rob?" Danielle asked, and sounded awful.

"Yeah, it's me. Are you okay?"

"No, not really. I guess I drank a little too much last night."

"They say alcohol's a killer."

"I am now a firm believer in that saying. I really am sorry. I had planned to show you the sights today. But, with the rain and my headache and upset stomach, maybe it just wasn't meant to be."

Rob swallowed his disappointment. "Yeah. Well, I hope you get to feeling better. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, I'll make it. I'll try to eat some saltines later."

"Okay. If I can help in any way, please, just give me a call."

"I will, Rob, I will. I really appreciate it. And no matter how I feel tomorrow, I'll meet you downstairs and ride over to the radio station with you." Rob's week-long in-city publicity tour kicked off tomorrow and Danielle had cleared her schedule to make sure he had no problems getting to and from each appearance.

"Until then..."

She was gone and Rob flipped his phone shut.

In truth, he felt pretty rough himself. He changed into a pair of lounge pants and a sleeveless tee shirt. He channel surfed for a while, finding nothing interesting, and decided to get on the computer for a bit.

After returning a few emails, he opened his word processing program, but wasn't in the mood for that, either. The sky was gray and the clouds the color of gunmetal.

He ordered room service—a T-bone steak and roasted asparagus. He washed it down with a pitcher of Pepsi, and a popped a pill or two for dessert.

Then, drowsy from the meal and pills, Rob stretched out across the bed, nestled his face into a pillow and drifted off to sleep, the faint, lingering scent of Bethany's perfume lulling him away from the rainy city day.

The rest of the week flew by. Rob was naturally a little nervous during his first on-air interview, but the host, Rich Mayor, was pleasant and quickly made him feel comfortable. Since Don Imus was no longer on the air, Mayor had quickly become the Big Apple's number one FM radio personality, and, as far as Rob was concerned, he deserved his success. Mayor was a red-headed jovial fellow, rather wide across the middle, but could find humor in the direst of situations. While he freely admitted he'd never read any of Rob's books, after Rob read half of the first chapter, live, on-air, he pledged to pick the book up as soon as it was available. Rob thanked him and that was that.

By Wednesday, Rob was comfortable talking on-air. His interview with a columnist for the *New York Times Book Review* on Thursday went exceptionally well. Friday, he hosted a reading for a large literary club. By the time the question and answer session was over, he was as suave and confident as any career politician.

In celebration of his booming week, Danielle agreed to have dinner with him.

The meal went well enough, the restaurant a fine one, uptown. The dinner conversation was superficial but amusing. Rob learned a lot about his agent and he shared some of his life stories as well. He was surprised to find that she was the daughter of the well-known writer. Why he'd never associated their last names, he didn't know. But after finding it out, he saw how she'd first become interested in a literary profession. For some reason, she wasn't very fond of her father. She didn't come right out and say as much, but Rob was able to read between the lines.

Over pastries, they talked about Rob's divorce. He was gentle with it, not only to appear to Danielle as a sensitive person, but because it was a sore subject. He was having the time of his life, but there were nights he awoke and found himself reaching for Ellen. He would, of course, never share that little fact with anyone.

A gentle breeze was blowing down the street when they left the restaurant. For mid-December, the city was remarkably warm and not a single snowflake dropped the entire day.

"Y'know, Krutcher's waiting for another book," Danielle said.

"I've got one. But I'd like to wait until *Fear* is released."

"You're putting a lot of confidence in it?"

"Yeah. I think it will sell well. Maybe it'll hit the lists, maybe it won't." By the "lists", Rob meant the best-sellers' lists, the most prominent being the *New York Times Review*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *L.A. Times* lists.

"I'd just like to wait until we see how it does. You know as well as I do that if it doesn't bomb, and sells a few copies, we'll be in a much better place to negotiate a contract."

"I know, Rob. Remember, that *is* my specialty. And I have all the faith in the world in your book. But let's just say that for one reason or another, it doesn't sell. If that's the case, Bennet may publish it, but there will definitely not be a million-dollar advance for it. "

"I know, I know. It's just I am really, really proud of this new one and I want Bennet to really get behind it."

"When do I get to see it?"

"Huh?"

"Don't act crazy, Rob. I am your agent, after all. I think I have a right to check out the merchandise."

"Uh, I...don't know."

Danielle punched him playfully in the arm. In the light of the street lamps she looked as beautiful as ever. She dressed down for the evening, going so far as to even wear eyeglasses. Whether they were real or not, Rob couldn't forget the remark he'd made about his preconceived notion of an agent. However, these were no horn rims. Instead, Danielle's glasses were thin silver wire, the lenses delicately small ovals and contrary to her supposed hopes, made her even more attractive. She wore a dark maroon winter dress that reached almost to the ground. Probably off the rack from a department store, but it fit her form exceptionally well. Her hair, dark like chestnuts, was arranged in a casual pile on top of her head. For the first time, Rob realized she resembled a younger version of the country singer Shania Twain.

He liked her playful spirit, it was the first time she'd

dropped her guard, even a little. From the onset, Rob had felt the wall she'd built around herself. Armor against heartbreak and disappointment, no doubt.

"I tell you what," he said. "For a kiss on the cheek, I'll tell you the title. One on the lips, the manuscript is yours."

She scrunched up her face. "Didn't we decide to keep this business?" But something glinted in her eyes. It was there only an instant before disappearing. Rob almost missed it, but he didn't.

"That is business, I assure you. A perfectly legitimate deal. Goods for services rendered. Supply and demand."

"I'll tell you what, Robert Caulder. How about we just head on back to your hotel, get naked, and have steamy passionate sex, working our way from the bed, to the shower, and then, finally to the floor."

"Surprisingly, I would not be adverse to that at all."

"I'm just kidding." She smirked at him.

"But I wasn't." He moved close to her. The streets were busy, but it was the city after all, and no one gave them the slightest glance. Her breath caressed his neck. He turned his head down as he placed two fingers and a thumb under her chin and raised her lips until they almost touched his own.

For a heartbeat, he didn't make a move. When he started, it was too late. Danielle pushed away from him, albeit gently. Then, she patted his ass.

"How much for that?"

He recovered quickly. "For that little spanking I'll tell you what it's about."

"Okay, fair enough. Shoot."

"About three hundred and seventy pages."

It took only a second for the bad joke to register. She took it in good humor. "Asshole."

"Now that, my dear, I truly am. However, to apologize for my forwardness, I'll email you a copy of the 'script when I get back to the hotel. Under the express condition that you sit on it until after the book has been out two weeks."

She considered this. "What if we're making a mistake?"

"What if we are?"

"Easy come, easy go. Is that it?"

"No. It's more about me having faith in my vision, enough faith, as a matter of fact, that I put everything on the line for what I feel is the best work of my career." He had been almost solemn when he'd spoke. Coincidentally, he had not yet chosen which book he wanted published next, he would have to decide between now and the morning.

"I see," Danielle said. She actually seemed to appreciate his stubbornness.

"This is my stop." They were in front of an apartment building. They couldn't have walked more than a couple of blocks from the restaurant. But then, staying on her home turf was probably what she'd planned. She'd made the reservations and picked him up in a cab at his hotel. A true professional.

"How about inviting me up?"

"You are nothing if not persistent, Rob."

"So I've been told. What do you say?"

"I say goodnight." She did something unexpected then. She stepped up on tiptoes and planted her warm lips against his cheek, before walking toward her front door. "I'll be watching my inbox," she said over her shoulder as she stepped inside.

Rob was left alone on a dark street in a city he did not know. But he was happy, hell, thrilled. For the first time in a long time he was happy.

## ***Thirteen***

The next thirty days went by in a blur. The first signing at the Barnes and Noble went better than either Rob or Danielle expected. Emmitt Krutcher had even made time to show up for the tour's kickoff. The store was packed and twice employees made trips to other stores to pick up copies of *Fear of the Dark*.

Apparently, all the publicity was paying off. Rob made good use of the pack of black Bic pens he'd picked up beforehand.

He enchanted the readers that showed up for his signature and their first edition copies. He was careful to have everyone spell out their name for him. He'd hate to waste a book just because he'd misspelled a name.

In the end, there had been much more of a demand than Barnes and Noble had anticipated and people were turned away with only a rain check and a promise of a signed, though not inscribed, book later in the week.

The signing lasted six hours.

From New York, Rob began a life on the road. All in all, the tour was a success. In a few cities, a few copies remained on the shelves, but in most, several readers left empty handed. For the first week his right arm, his writing arm, throbbed with a life-force all its own. If not for a steady stream of Ben-Gay and a prescription for powerful muscle relaxers, he would've had to cancel the tour. But he persevered.

He greatly enjoyed interacting with the people who bought his books, causing the long lines to move even more slowly.

On the rare nights that he found the energy, Rob ventured out in search of night life. More times than not, he took a woman back to the hotel with him.

On Christmas Eve, he had a package delivered to Danielle's apartment. They talked on the phone almost daily, Rob calling her office a little before five. They usually only talked about five minutes, but on Christmas Eve, she called him.

"It's beautiful," was the first thing she said. "You shouldn't have," was the second.

"Hello to you, too." Rob was on his way to his room in Tampa with a Boston Market bag in one hand—turkey, dressing, a side of green beans, and macaroni and cheese. The room boasted a breathtaking view of the bay, but with the palms, sand, and surf it hardly felt like Christmas.

"How much did this cost?" He'd sent her a Tiffany and Co. diamond necklace, bought and paid for before he left New York. The special delivery had cost extra, but he hadn't minded.

"That's not a very polite question. Do you want to send it back? I'm sure that can be arranged," he said, his voice teasing.

"Not on your life. I'm putting it on as we speak."

"I'm sure it's gorgeous. But it most certainly pales in comparison to its wearer."

Danielle didn't speak for a moment. "Merry Christmas, Rob."

"And to you, my agent from above."

She giggled. "Where are you?"

"On the way back to the room."

"Are you in the hotel?"

"No, just stepping in."

"Go to the front desk."

"My food'll get cold."

"Oh, to hell with your food. Go on. Ask the clerk for your package."

Rob smiled. "What?"

"Just do it."

With his cell phone in one hand and his holiday dinner in the other, Rob strode across the hotel lobby and waited for the clerk. "Excuse me, miss," he said when she was free.



"My name is Robert Caulder. I believe you have a package for me?"

"Yes, sir. One moment," the clerk said, disappearing through a door.

"What's this about?"

"It's a secret," Danielle said.

"Here you go, Mr. Caulder," the desk clerk said as she emerged from the back. She handed him an envelope with the hotel letterhead on it. Across the front it read: Mr. Robert Caulder 1705.

"You've got it?"

"Yep."

"Good night."

She hung up. Despite his curiosity, Rob waited until he was in his room before he opened the envelope.

Inside was a single sheet of paper folded three times. It was a fax of the current *New York Times Hardcover Best-seller List*. Located in the number fifteen slot was *Fear of the Dark* by Robert Caulder.

Rob's heart skipped a beat.

Written across the bottom of the page, in Danielle's now familiar scrawl, were the words: *I guess you knew what you were talking about. Merry Xmas.*

It was the best gift he'd ever received and he went to bed that night believing in Santa Claus.

~ \* ~

Bennet purchased Rob's next book, *Bad Season*, for the grand total of two million dollars. The film rights to *Fear* sold to Sony Pictures for nine hundred thousand dollars. Robert Caulder was now officially a multi-millionaire.

*Fear* rose to number eight on the *New York Times* list, number nine on the *USA Today* list, and eleven on the *Wall Street Journal*.

The year started with a bang and he was on his way up and up and up.

Though he owned the property in Colorado free and clear, Rob chose to return to New York when his tour was finished. He thought about Danielle a lot while away and hoped that when he returned, she would sing a different song. Unfortunately, that was not so.

He showered her with gifts, gave her attention. All for

naught. Even worse, he learned she was dating a copy editor. That really pissed him off. Here he was a certified success and she rejected him for someone who earned less in a year than he accrued in monthly interest.

So, while he never let his agent wander far from his mind, he acquainted himself with the local nightlife.

He bought an apartment on the upper west side of the city, paying a princely sum for the lease and appointed it lavishly, using a renowned interior decorator. Before long, he was proud of his new home.

Through a P.O. Box he received fan mail and electronic correspondence filled his inbox. While he was quite capable of handling the daily demands of his affairs, he quickly bored of doing so.

By May, he'd had enough. He needed a personal assistant. He would find someone to handle the fan mail, non-sensitive correspondence, errands, and to do general gopher work. He contacted a temporary service and they scheduled a round of interviews for the following week.

On Friday, he stayed in, finishing work on another novel. He slept late the next morning, not rising before noon. He ate lunch—a delivery from a local delicatessen—lounged in front of the television for a couple of hours and watched DVDs.

Rob's movie collection was beginning to rival his library of books. He'd never had much interest in films until his first book had been committed to celluloid. Since then, he bought movies as if they were going out of style. First, he purchased only horror, buying everything from the black-and-white classics up to the newest releases. After he'd amassed hundreds of those, he moved onto science fiction and fantasy, action, adventure, drama, and even a couple of romantic comedies—chick flicks. But he'd been busy and hadn't had much of a chance to delve into the discs or truly enjoy his HD TV and surround sound system. That afternoon, he watched *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Halloween*.

By the end of the last film, he was restless. He showered and dressed in jeans and a Tommy Hilfiger button-down. He'd purchased a tanning bed and his skin was dark, like coffee with cream.

He splashed on a bit of cologne, shoved some breath

mints into his pocket, grabbed his keys and cell phone and headed out.

~ \* ~

The Fusebox was a chic club in the East Village. Rob had been a few times before and really enjoyed it. The drinks weren't watered down. The crowd was a mixture of young urban professionals out for a good time and the spoiled offspring of older urban professionals.

Rob took a cab over to the club and walked in to the booming bass line of a popular hip-hop song. He'd never frequented the club when it was packed, but tonight the crowd seemed to almost surge against the building's inner walls.

*If a man can't get laid here, he thought, he can't get laid anywhere.*

He went to the bar and picked up a Jim and Coke, more for appearance than anything else. He sipped, feeling the cocktail of pills he'd taken in taxi begin to take effect.

He danced with several different women on the dance floor. The strobe lighting and swirl of sweaty, steamy bodies almost smothered him.

Rob danced with an Asian woman, a black girl, and two white women by the time he needed a break. Surprisingly, he found a vacant table on the second-floor and practically leaped into the seat, obviously vexing a pair of buxom blondes. He smiled apologetically, but they spun on their heels and disappeared into the crowd. From his perch up above, he looked out over the mass writhing down below.

Over the slam of music, he heard laughter. He turned and saw a table full of women. Four of them, all knockouts. Even in the dim light, Rob saw that they were far superior to the average female. Their clothing was expensive, what little of it there was. No doubt a group of trust-fund babies or power children.

His eyes lingered on one in particular. She was blonde and wore a low-cut red dress. Her chest was a deep valley of supremely tanned cleavage and Rob was fairly certain those humps were not natural; a skilled surgeon had made a few grand off that chest.

A waitress came and took his drink order and while he waited, several men swaggered up and attempted to get one

of the foursome to dance or make small-talk. Every single one was turned away within seconds, each attempt hilarious to the women.

They couldn't possibly be older than twenty-five, yet they seemed to be professionals at the lust game. Two were brunettes, one a redhead, the fourth, the one Rob favored, a blonde. She was by far the most attractive, though each one of them had superstar potential.

His drink came and he downed it, the liquor burning its way down. Finally, he stood up from his table, walked to the blonde, bent low to whisper into her ear and stepped away, almost as if he'd never stopped at all.

He made his way down the stairs and over to the bar. He paid a couple fifty bucks for their seats and ordered a Pepsi for himself and a Hurricane—he'd noticed it was what the blonde had been sipping on upstairs. Before the drinks came, the woman slid into the seat next to him. She looked even better up close.

Beyond that, however, he thought he'd seen her before, but he couldn't place where.

"Thanks for the drink. Did you mean what you said?"

"If you're game, so am I."

"My name's Cindy. Yours?"

"Rob. Rob Caulder."

"That's a nice name, Rob Caulder. So, what did you have in mind?"

"How about a suite at the Four Seasons?"

"Funny. You'd have to be a serious player to pull that one off."

Rob only smiled. When he pulled out a thick wad of one hundred dollar bills to pay for their drinks and leave a huge tip, Cindy's mouth dropped open wide. Her teeth were pearls, the product of expensive cosmetic dentistry, no doubt. She was nothing if not a testament to the modern day art of physical enhancement.

~ \* ~

An hour later they were high up in the Four Seasons hotel. It had been easy, but Rob had become a master of greasing wheels. The money was a necessity, but so was the skill.

"So, Rob Caulder, you a businessman or what?" Cindy

had a slight Midwestern accent. He'd noticed it immediately back at the club, but now, out of the cacophony, it was much more prominent.

"I'm a writer."

"A writer, huh? What do you write?"

"Books, novels, horror mostly."

"Name one."

"*From the Ashes*," he said, choosing it because it had recently been released theatrically. It did the trick. Cindy's eyes lit up instantly.

"I saw that one. Didn't read the book, though."

"What did you think of it?"

"I thought it was creepy. But I heard it made a lot of money."

"A whole lot." Cindy seemed pleased by this fact. She pulled him to the sofa and brought him down next to her. She clutched a small red handbag.

"You think you might have a spot for me?" She blushed like a young girl.

"I don't know. Let's see how tonight goes."

Apparently, Cindy got the gist of his comment. She pulled him close and her mouth sought out his. When they kissed, she pushed his mouth open with her tongue. It tasted sweet and hot and wanting. Her breath tasted of fruit and Rob remembered the fruity drinks she'd had at the club. After a while, they stopped kissing. Rob was as hard as cold granite and Cindy's nipples poked through the thin fabric of her dress.

"Want to do a line?" she asked.

Rob didn't understand at first, but watched as she fished items from her handbag.

From a small plastic bag she dumped a white powder onto the mirrored coffee table.

*Coke.*

He'd never done cocaine, but wasn't disinclined to try it.

Cindy pulled out a thin razor and chopped the substance into even finer particles. Then, she used the razor to make two distinct lines, parallel to one another.

"Let me have a hundred dollar bill." Rob was so caught up watching her at her task, like a neurologist performing a

medical miracle before him, that he reached in his pocket, pulled a c-note from the roll, and handed it to her without comment.

Cindy rolled the currency into a short tube. When she finished, she turned to Rob and kissed him, but only once. Then she hiked up her skirt. Her legs were toned and firm, almost perfect. She pulled the dress up as far as it would go, and then scooted to the edge of the couch. She took Rob's hand and placed it on her smooth crevice. She wore no panties.

"I want you to feel what happens."

Rob was about to ask a question but before he could Cindy bent to the table and sniffed up an entire line through the rolled bill.

For a second, nothing happened. Then, a hot liquid seeped across his hand.

He smiled. And snorted his own line without removing his hand from Cindy's dress.

When his line was gone, they proceeded to do the deed like porno stars.

Two hours later, they returned to the coffee table and each did another line. Then, back to the bed, then the floor, the shower, and finally, the floor.

Four hours after entering luxurious suite, they were out of blow and still unfulfilled. Rob considered the powder a miracle drug. After snorting it, his mouth instantly watered for Cindy's body. And her body was a tool she well knew how to use.

"Can we get some more?" Rob asked.

"I know a place," she said, glancing at the clock on the mantle. "Hey, ever done X?"

"Ecstasy? Yeah. You ever rolled?" Rolled was the term for the high of Ecstasy, a singularly sexual high.

Cindy smiled a sinful smile. "I think you'd really like it. Come on, let's hurry."

Why they were hurrying, Rob had no idea. He noticed that her ass looked as firm from a five-foot distance as it had when he'd kneaded the flesh with his hands, then his mouth—he realized he was still very high. He felt fine, remarkably good as a matter of fact, but the room was distorted, sounds coming a second or two too late. But he

smiled and decided the hell with it.

Down on the street, they attempted to hail a taxi after turning down the doorman's offer, laughing as if the aging man's offer was the most hilarious thing they'd ever heard. No cab stopped for them.

Rob noticed a parking garage across the street. "Come on, follow me."

Cindy followed him in a drunken gait across the street. They passed the attendant, Rob waving as nonchalantly as possible, which was difficult with so much cocaine flowing through his system.

They went to the second level.

"What are we looking for?" Cindy asked. She was trying to whisper, but was actually talking quite loudly.

"A car," Rob said and they both burst out laughing.

"I like this one." Cindy pointed to a Cadillac.

"Too stuffy," Rob remarked.

"How about this one?" It was a Lexus SUV with a Harvard Decal on the front glass.

"A gas hog."

Again the duo laughed like Martin Lawrence had just cracked a joke.

"Ooh," Cindy cooed and Rob stopped to see where she was looking. A blazing blue Dodge Viper.

"You get us in, I'll start it."

"Deal." Rob removed his shirt, balled it around his fist, and smashed the driver's side window. Instantly, a blaring alarm rang out. Cindy was past him in a flash and fumbling beneath the dashboard. The alarm died away and a few seconds later, the Viper roared to life.

"How'd you know how to hot-wire a car?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies. Hop in, cowboy."

"I thought I was driving."

"You thought wrong." She smiled like the devil. "Hold on."

Cindy slammed the gearshift and popped the clutch and the tires squealed as they sped toward the exit. The engine rumbled under the hood as she piloted the car down the ramp. Instead of slowing at the entrance barricade, Cindy stomped the gas pedal, shattering the wooden arm

like a Popsicle stick.

"Woo-hoo!" she yelled as the tires barked out onto the street. She slammed through the gears and the Viper surged forward with so much speed that the landscape flashed by like continuous rays of light.

The sight of this drop-dead gorgeous girl driving helter skelter through the city streets in this magnificent machine was like a scene from a dream for Rob. He watched her. Her hands were taut and her grip was firm on the steering wheel. She breathed heavily, as she had done while they made love.

The dream became a nightmare in the blink of an eye.

The transfer truck came out of nowhere, but luckily Cindy saw it in the nick of time. She swerved, then over-corrected. She lost control of the car.

The Dodge Viper barreled over a fire hydrant, water shooting skyward. The car crashed through the plate glass window of a jewelry store, coming to a complete, sudden stop. Rob's forehead cracked into the dash, Cindy's into the steering wheel, her right arm snapping on impact. Apparently, the air bags had been switched off.

The last thing Rob heard was the tinkling of glass as it rained down from the shattered windshield. Then, darkness.

~ \* ~

After their injuries were taken care of, they were both booked. Rob never wanted to see Cindy again. He spent a long weekend in lockup and it took more than a bit of cunning to escape beatings and homosexual love. A big, burly man named Chester took him under his wing and let no harm come to Rob as long as all Rob's meals went to him. Rob considered it a swell deal.

He was unable to post bond until Monday morning and, even then, had to find a responsible party the city could release him to.

He could think of only one person: Danielle Greer.

She was surprisingly chipper. Rob was allowed to leave his jumpsuit behind and dress in his jeans and tee shirt—his over shirt had been left behind in the parking garage Saturday night.

They walked out of the jail together. So far, Danielle hadn't addressed him. But he knew it was coming, and he was right. "Have a nice weekend, jailbird?"



"I really need breakfast. And my bed."

"Before you return to your wonderful life," she said, stepping into her car. "I've got something to show you."

Rob took a seat next to her and she tossed a newspaper in his lap. It was the *New York Times* and he'd made the front page. The mug shot wasn't flattering. The headline: *Best-selling Writer on Drug-fuelled Rampage with Mystery Woman*. Surprisingly, no picture of Cindy accompanied his. The story was only comprised of a few paragraphs, but in this paper that said a lot. And it told the story well. Toxicology reports not only revealed cocaine in both parties' blood, but a cocktail of prescription drugs in Rob's. Surprise, surprise.

Rob and his accomplice were charged with grand theft auto, reckless driving, driving to endanger, and driving under the influence. Rob didn't understand how he had been charged with all counts, but he was.

Danielle gave him a moment to read over the story. Then, she said, "Are you okay?" She sounded sincere, but Rob didn't care to talk about the weekend's events.

"I'm fine."

"You need anything?"

Rob hesitated, then said, "A good lawyer."

## ***Fourteen***

As it turned out, the story of Rob's debauchery and car theft didn't only make the New York papers. It was the buzz of tabloids, online message boards, and legitimate reporting services nationwide. The attention wasn't all bad, however. Rob's brush with the law seemed to pay off as far as book sales went. His most recent release, the paperback edition of *Fear*, hit number four on the *New York Times Best-seller List*. Amazingly, it stayed there for several weeks.

When *Bad Season* was released in hardcover a month after *Fear's* paperback release, it was number five or better on every list Rob checked.

His brief incarceration was long forgotten and he was in Hollywood. The producers for the *Fear of the Dark* film kept their word and Rob had a small speaking part. Hopeful that it wouldn't be cut in the final editing, Rob left the studio in high spirits.

Some of the studio people introduced him to a few prominent folks around the Sony lot. But the best part of the day, save for his acting debut—if you could call a security guard attacking—then promptly mutilated by the film's antagonist a debut, was meeting Trey Bones. Bones was the lead singer for the popular rock band Razor Bone, which currently had a number one album, *Delicate Caress*, and number one single, "Just Like We Used To".

Razor Bone was the band of the minute, and if they played their cards right, they just might have one more hit record up their sleeve before slinking away into musical oblivion, like so many had done before and even more were likely to do in the future.

They'd met on the set of their new video, *Crimson Skies*. Sony not only signed the band to their label but also produced their videos in house. This was the first inkling Rob had of how supremely large the corporation was, which made him rethink how much he would ask for the rights to his next release. It could wait, however. *Bad Season* had already been sold to them for two-point-five.

While Rob liked the whole band, Trey was the most outgoing, and invited Rob to hook up with him that evening.

"I love your books, man. All of them. I can't wait to see how twisted the next one is."

"I'll get you a copy before they hit the shelf."

"That's a promise?"

"That's a pledge."

"Fucking awesome, man."

And that was that. But they never did manage to get together that night. Rob was packing his bags at the end of the week, preparing for the flight back to New York, when his cell rang.

"You got a passport, Robbie, my man?" It took him a minute to place the voice.

"Trey?"

"The one and only. Do ya?"

"Do I what?"

"Have a passport?"

"Yeah." He and Ellen obtained one in anticipation of a vacation that never made it to fruition.

"Good, meet me at my hotel. I feel up for a trip. You busy?"

"Nothing on the agenda. Where we going?"

"Ever been to Germany?"

"No, but my books sell really well there." The German translations of his last two novels had all been high sellers.

"Good enough, see you in a while."

~ \* ~

Sony Music had been very generous to Razor Bone. They were flying the band to Germany to perform a show for a music fest. Trey added Rob's name to the roster yesterday.

The flight was a series of connections and layovers. The air was remarkably cool when the plane finally touched down on German soil.

The musicians and roadies got thoroughly sauced on the flight. However, Rob and Trey refused the alcohol. Rob discovered Trey shared his attraction to pills, and together, they popped an amazing amount during the journey.

The term jet-lag took on a whole new meaning for Rob when he arrived at his hotel room. He crashed onto the bed and was immediately out.

He was unsure how long he had slept. He was also unsure how long the pounding on his door had been going on. He stumbled to his feet and clawed his way to the door. "Yeah?" he asked in a hoarse and exhausted voice.

"Open the frigging door, man."

Rob opened the door and Trey stood there, decked out in rock star attire: black leather pants, black satin shirt, and a huge silver cross around his neck. "You ready?"

"For what?"

"For what, he says. For the motherfucking show. Damn, man, are you okay?"

"Just burnt out."

Trey fished something from his pocket. Three capsules. "Here, take one of these now and—"

Rob immediately dry-swallowed all three.

"Well, anyway. Shower and get dressed. We have a backstage shindig to attend."

~ \* ~

Rob had been to very few concerts in his life, and never backstage. He wasn't prepared for it. If he could've likened it to anything, it would be the hottest club of the moment during opening night.

Countless men and women thrummed together, barely a hair's breadth between them. Music blared from unseen speakers. Groupies and technicians shared space as musicians clamored around like kings of the hill.

"If you think this is something," Trey said during one of the rare moments they saw one another, "wait till after the show."

While the majority of the crowd was German, Rob was pleasantly surprised to hear only an occasional foreign word. Most conversations were spoken in English.

Half an hour before Razor Bone hit the stage, Rob was invited to a small room to share in the band's pre-show

briefing. The concert was in an open-air venue, but there was plenty of room for the bands and their crews to lay in wait. They were just outside Berlin, in a town Rob couldn't pronounce and he was having the time of his life.

The five members of the band huddled together: Trey, Bonner, the lead guitarist, Fletcher Crown, the bassist, Herbert Howell, the drummer, and Jack Strut, the rhythm guitarist. They began to chant words that Rob couldn't quite make out. There were three other men and a woman in the room with him. The woman was introduced as Nikki, Bonner's girlfriend for the night.

After the band broke their huddle, each took a pull from the same bottle of Jack Daniels. Then, like a college football team, they thundered out of the room. Rob followed them down the white, bright corridors. When the band went up, he went down, and soon found his VIP box seat.

The performance went off without a hitch.

The crowd sang along to every Razor Bone song, especially the ballads.

About forty-five minutes, and two encores later, Razor Bone left the stage.

Trey had been right about backstage. If it had been teeming before, it was surging now.

The most noticeable difference was that women now outnumbered the men five to one. Trey gave Rob a brief overview of how this happened. During the performance, or even before, members of the band indicated girls in the crowd that should be allowed access backstage. Sometimes this was done by gestures, other times by advanced radio communication. *Isn't that something*, Rob reasoned, *all the advances we've made, and we use them to chase tail*.

Not that he found anything at all wrong with that.

In fact, he admired it.

Trey and the bassist disappeared into the showers with several women, none of them dogs, and Rob felt a pang of jealousy.

He lost himself in the crowd, listening to people talk, and initiating a few conversations himself. For the most part, however, he just stood in awe of the activity around him.

The awe was short-lived. "You ready?" Trey asked, tugging his shirt sleeve.

"For?"

"For the after-party. It's at a nearby club. I'd tell you the name, but I can't remember it, and you wouldn't understand me even if I tried. But it's supposed to be very exclusive. Grade-A, prime puss or so I'm told."

"Let's go, then."

"Yes," Trey said. "Let's."

~ \* ~

The Blue Herron Exotic Club was housed in an unassuming four-story structure in a trendier part of the newly renovated section of Berlin. Their car deposited Rob, Trey, and Bonner at the front of the dark stone building. The windows must've been tinted, for no light escaped them. The only indication that the building was inhabited was a small neon sign that read: *Open*. The sign was affixed to a dark glass door.

"What kind of place is this, again?" Rob asked.

"They say it's the best place in the country to sample the delicacies," Bonner said. He was usually so high on pot he didn't make sense. The subject of getting laid, though, cut through Bonner's slurred words.

"A few guys told us about this place. Damon Crux, from *Devil Dare*, said he drops ten grand here every time he comes."

"Well, we going to get out of the frigging street and dip our dicks before mine shrivels up and falls off, or what?" Bonner said and stepped to the door.

"Well, a poet he is not. But I think we should follow his lead," Trey said.

"I agree," Rob said.

The two pushed through the door. Trey first, followed by Rob.

The Blue Herron's entryway was not noticeably different from the exterior. Cheap industrial carpet, a sour blue color, covered the floor. There was remarkably little in the way of furnishings. A counter sat against the far wall, dusty and ancient. A tall German woman in a faux fur coat stood behind the counter. Her expression was slack, unconcerned. To her right, mounted on the wall, was a simple black telephone.

"Gutenabend, Herren," she said. *Good evening,*

*gentlemen*. Her accent was thick.

"Hello," Rob said, the other two silent beside him.

"Are you lost?"

"Uh," Trey said. "I'm looking for Hitler's daughter." Rob wasn't sure he'd heard his friend correctly. Bonner, as well, look puzzled.

The German woman stared at him, her thin, pointed nose not unlike those of evil witches in fairy tales. "I see."

She held her gaze a moment, then picked up the telephone and spoke one word in German. She replaced the phone on the hook. Finally, her placid face shattered and she smiled slightly.

The door cracked open.

"Sie können hereinkommen," the stern woman said.

Strange, foreign music filtered in through the open door. Like terrified children, the trio entered into another world.

The forlorn appearance of the outer room and the building's façade disappeared. Plush velvet carpet covered the floor; the room was dim, but lit with purple lighting. The lobby's antiseptic smell was replaced by spice and sugar and a lush scent that he couldn't identify.

The room was set up as a casual meeting place. Black crushed velvet couches, love seats, and large, comfortable-looking chairs were arranged in close, welcoming positions. But the seats were not empty. Men in business suits and casual clothing filled the seats. They wore expressions ranging from calm coolness to agitated nervousness.

A tall but beautiful woman appeared from nowhere and directed them to a row of seats. Though pretty, her features were stoic and hard, the face of a prison warden.

Both Bonner and Rob sat. Trey conversed with the woman, pointing at his friends. After a moment, the woman nodded and left. Trey took a seat between them.

"What happens now?" Rob said.

"She said to sit and wait."

And that's what they did. Women began to emerge from a dark hallway, scantily clad in short, almost sheer robes, in teddies, in bodices. Each went to one man, reached out to him, and led him away. There was no deliberation or system to it; it was if the women had already chosen their

mates.

Finally, the room was empty save for Trey, Rob, and Bonner.

A black woman sheathed in a light blue gown that stretched to the ground and flowed outward like the petals of a flower walked to Bonner. Her skin was as dark as midnight, and her body perfect in proportion. She could have easily been an African queen. Even her gait was regal as she sauntered across the room.

Bonner was on his feet before their hands touched and never looked back as he followed the woman away.

Several minutes passed. How many Rob didn't know. He was submerged in delicious anticipation.

Another woman emerged from the darkness and approached Trey. She was slighter shorter than the lady behind the counter out front. The only other similarity they shared was a stern, determined look. Dressed in a short white robe, she was slender and lithe, her hair long and flowing. It was naturally blond and shone in the low purple light.

"Hitler was an asshole, but he did something right, eh?" Trey whispered as he was pulled to his feet. Just before they disappeared down the corridor, Trey looked back at Rob and gave him a sly wink.

Rob was now alone in the room. He was anxious but uneasy as well. Rob had never had trouble with the opposite sex. Since he had gone away to college, he'd been able to attract women, though nowhere near as successfully as with his newfound wealth and status. But this was a brothel, a flop joint, a whore house. He had no more business here than he had on the front pew of a church on Sunday morning.

But he couldn't bring himself to leave. He was as susceptible as any man to the pleasures of the flesh, arguably even more so. These were no street walkers here. From his one experience with a high class call girl, he could easily say that the women here were above and beyond them by leaps and bounds.

He decided to stay, fooling himself that there had ever really been a choice.

And he was rewarded for his decision.



She stepped from the darkness like a hovering spirit. But she was not the stuff of his novels, far from it.

She had the face of an angel, a true higher being. She was tall, well over six feet. Her hair, platinum blonde, was layered and feathered close to her exquisite face. Her figure was stunning, evident even though she was wrapped in a long, terry cloth robe. Her skin was darkly tanned, the color of bronze, a striking contrast to the white robe. She walked like a lioness, light and brisk but with a confidence borne of strength and power.

When she took his hand into hers, her flesh felt warm as silk. He felt weightless as she brought him to his feet. She turned without a word; their hands still clasped, and piloted him away, down the dark hall. The aroma wafting from her was fragrant, exotic, and wild, completely and irrevocably enticing. She led Rob up two flights of stairs. They emerged in another hallway, this one lit intermittently by brass fixtures glowing a gentle blue.

They stopped at a nondescript door. She did not knock, she did not turn the knob, only pushed the door open.

The room was bright, much brighter than Rob expected. It was bare save for a bed frame with a huge mattress covered in robin's egg blue linen. The headboard was wrought iron. One entire wall was nothing but one single, very wide, very tall mirror.

"Haben Sie einen Sitz," she said.

"Uh, I don't speak German. At least not very well."

"Have a seat," she said in broken English, with a slight smile. "My name is Katrina, and I will make you very..." she searched for a word, "happy."

She gently pushed Rob backward and he landed softly on the bed. She stepped back about five feet. From her robe, she pulled a small remote control and tapped a button. Music seeped from unseen speakers. Dance music, techno. Though not too loud, the volume was high enough that he could feel the beat of the song thrumming deep inside him. Another tap of the remote and the bright light diminished by half.

She swayed lightly but confidently with the music.

She pouted her lips and swung her hair backwards.

It was Danielle's hair, Rob thought. That's what had caught him so off-guard downstairs. Though Katrina's hair

color was the polar opposite of Danielle's, the cut was exactly the same. But thoughts of Danielle did not belong in his mind. Not now, not in this place.

Katrina bent and slapped him across the cheek. Not as hard as she could, he reasoned, just a sting.

"Pay attention," she said, and he did.

She resumed her performance. She freed the robe's belt and spread the garment open. She moved painfully slow.

He hoped for a bare body, a deliciously tanned form.

But what he saw was almost as welcome.

Yes, her body was the same golden bronze as her face and arms, the muscles of her stomach toned and flat. Her legs, long and sleek, and might well have been designed by Hugh Hefner himself.

Her chest and pelvis were covered, however.

Katrina wore a leather bra and panty set. The bra was cut low, the cups covering only about half of her generous mounds. The centers were cut out, a fat, delectable nipple poking out from each one. The panties were also devoid of a center section. Two straps, one wrapped around each hip, kept the garment in place. Through the opening, Rob saw a wondrous sight.

"You like?"

Rob found himself nodding. "Yes. Very, very much."

"Ausgezeichnet." *Excellent.*

Katrina moved from the center of the room to the side wall and opened a closet door Rob hadn't noticed. From it she withdrew a stainless steel, wheeled cart. When she rolled it over, he saw it was covered with sex toys of every size, shape, and description.

From a cubbyhole on the opposite side of the cart, Katrina extracted what at first looked like a coiled serpent.

Then she snapped it out.

It was a whip. The Indiana Jones type. After snapping the air several times with it, she tossed Rob a pair of handcuffs from the top of the cart.

"Put those on and prepare for the ride of your life."

Rob did as instructed. But without fear, only lust and a juvenile excitement that lasted even after the sex goddess, dominatrix, if you will, lashed him across the shoulder with

her leather weapon.

## ***Fifteen***

Life was golden for Robert Caulder. As a matter of fact, it couldn't have been sweeter if he'd written it himself. He'd been back from Germany for almost a month. The bruises and abrasions Katrina left on his body had long since faded but the memory of that night remained. He took it down from his mental shelf every now and then and slowly relished each single recollected detail.

But that one incident wasn't why he considered his life so wonderful. Money was rolling in faster than he or his newly hired accountant could keep track of. Business was booming.

For example, Marvel Comics bought the rights to *Bad Season*. Production had already begun and would correspond with the release of the book and the upcoming feature film, then continue the story into a life of its own. First, in traditional comic book format, with the option for graphic novels in the future.

*Fear of the Dark*, the video game, had been released by Electronic Arts just last week. While the main plot of the game held true to the novel, new characters were developed to create an action/adventure game. The sales were already looking good as well as the coverage in most gaming magazines.

Additionally, with the blessing of Bennet Publishing, he'd cut a deal with Ballantine to release a series of books set in his *Bad Season* world. While the books would be penned by other writers, his name would be prominently displayed on each cover, not to mention a hefty percentage of the take.

*Bad Season* itself was selling remarkably well. It reached number two on the NY list and remained there for three consecutive weeks. Since sales were so good in the states, Bennet scheduled a book tour for Rob through Europe. He was set to depart New York at the end of the week.

He cleared his agenda for the day. His personal assistant, Tabby, was turning out to be a godsend. She took care of countless tiring details and freed him to pursue interests and enjoy the pleasant side of his career. While she took care of the dirty jobs, Rob sipped on champagne, went to parties, and wrote page after page. Incidentally, Tabby was forty-five, married, and the mother of three grown children. Best not to be tempted by someone that had access to your personal information. Because with Rob, temptation often led to action, and action often led to boredom.

"Why do you keep sniffing? Do you have a cold?" Danielle asked. They were seated at a small table in a nice little Italian bistro. Danielle was dressed in an expensive pant suit. A strand of pearls graced her neck. It was good to see he wasn't the only one benefiting from his books.

"No. Just a little under the weather." Actually, Rob wasn't feeling well. But he'd be damned if he'd share that with his agent. She'd become smug toward him over the last several weeks and he'd only agreed to meet with her so that a last few minute ends could be tied up before he left the country. While still strongly attracted to her, Rob realized that the two of them would most likely never be a couple. His name was becoming well known to the public at large instead of only readers.

He appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* two weeks ago and *Ellen* just a week ago. He hoped that before long he would make the transition from daytime talk shows to the late shows. While talk shows were popular to a very wide demographic, Rob was consumed by the need to spread out to new audiences, especially the younger readers.

Hence his deal with Trey Bones and Razor Bone. Upon returning from the international book tour, Rob planned to meet up with Trey and the boys out on the west coast. Rob had a large role in their third video, slated to begin filming next week. He had, after all, written the screenplay for the

entire video. The song, "Heaven Will Wait" reminded him of a scene in one of his as yet unpublished works. At this point, Rob had five complete manuscripts, and was ahead of his publishing schedule. He shared an excerpt from the manuscript with Trey, who then sold the band on it. Next came the producers and the brass at Sony. Since Rob had film contracts with the company, the wheels moved easily. Besides starring in the video and being responsible for the short feature, he also made another concession with the band and the brass. During the closing seconds of the video, across a black screen would appear: *Based on a Story by Robert Caulder*. Rob was really psyched about the project and was anxious to begin.

But none of this uplifting news seemed to impress Danielle. While she'd made a fortune handling not only his literary contracts, but the subsidiaries as well, she grew more and more glum each time they met.

"What's the deal with the sunglasses?"

"Huh?" Rob asked.

"In case you haven't noticed, it's not exactly bright in here."

Rob had forgotten about the shades. He'd been wearing them more and more as of late, so often, in fact, that he hardly noticed them at all.

"Allergies."

"Oh." Danielle's voice was flat, unconvinced.

"So tell me, you called this meeting. What's up?"

"You don't have to act so thrilled. If I'm not mistaken, there was a time you'd have offered to follow me home for a quickie." Her quip had surely been meant as a joke. But with her, one never knew.

"I guess I just got tired of you telling me no."

Danielle looked stricken, but recovered well. "I didn't ask for this meeting to waste your time. Or mine, either. But Krutcher's been asking to see another manuscript for weeks. They have a schedule for your releases, remember? If Bennett's going to release a new book every six months, then we have to actually give them one. You see where I'm going with this?"

"I promise, Danielle, I understand you perfectly well. I'm no child. If you feel you need to treat me as such, that's

your business. I, however, would appreciate you speaking to me like I'm thirty years old."

Danielle's eyes narrowed. "Regardless, Robert. Bennet has shown a lot of enthusiasm for your titles, and for you to be moved up to this type of schedule shows that they're behind you one hundred and ten percent. Whether you appreciate that or not, is really none of my business. But you signed the contracts. You've cashed the checks. Now it's time for you to produce the goods. I can explain away only so much as creative eccentricity. Okay, you don't answer my calls. You don't return my emails. Fine. Fine and dandy. You and I have made a lot of money together. But if you can't start to act like a responsible person, then I'm fully prepared to end our contact right now."

"But Tabby takes care of—"

"I'm not finished, Robert." Danielle was fired up now, and despite his foul mood, Rob was not about to argue with her or stop her. "Tabby is a fine person, I'm sure. You're lucky to have her. But I do not represent your assistant, I represent *you*. In some instances I need to speak with you and only you. If you've become so high and mighty that you can't be bothered by your agent, the person you pay to look out for your best interests, the person that helped make you a household name *and* bailed you out of jail, then we should end this business relationship. Before you or I say or do something that we might regret."

Rob didn't say anything. He didn't have anything to say.

Apparently, Danielle was finished. Both with the discussion and the meeting. She pushed back her chair and stood.

Rob gripped her forearm before she passed. "Please sit down. Please." Danielle did, albeit slowly.

Rob sniffed. And removed his sunglasses.

"*Rob*," she said, raising her hand to her mouth.

Rob's eyes were bloodshot, and dark half-moon circles cradled the sockets. "I've had a rough week or two." He sniffed again and something warm began to trickle down his nostril. He raised a linen napkin to catch the blood before it dripped out.

"Rob. Look. I'm not blind. I think you need help. At

first, the fiasco with the car and all, I thought you were just testing out some limits, you know, sowing your wild oats or such. But you look worse each time I see you."

"I'm okay. Really. I'm trying to kick the coke."

"If I may be blunt, it doesn't seem to be going so well."

"Yeah," Rob said. In truth, he wasn't trying to slow his use of cocaine or any other drug. He was, however, chasing an elusive high. The first few occasions he'd done the coke it seemed to give him almost superhuman abilities. But recently, he had to do more and more just to keep from crashing to an all-time low. In fact, he used cocaine just to feel somewhat normal. He knew he should stop, or at least slow down. But knowing and doing were two different things. Completely different things.

"Why didn't you talk to me? I've always been here for you."

Rob was about to talk, to really *talk*. Danielle looked so sincere, so caring. Like the first night they'd met, during his first book release party. She'd squeezed his hand, making everything better. She'd been so sweet, so encouraging. Just like Ellen. Now that was someone he hadn't thought of in quite a while. The first year they'd been apart, he thought of her often, daily. But as time passed, so had those lingering doubts that he'd done the wrong thing by leaving her. But while Ellen was now a distant memory, Danielle was still very vivid, still very real. He was on the brink of reaching out to her and asking her for help.

But then he reconsidered.

Did he actually need anyone's help?

He was rich, relatively famous, and had the life most people could only dream of. So what if he had a few problems? Name one person in the history of the planet that hadn't had their share of problems along the way.

He'd come this far, he could make it further.

"I really want you to continue representing me. I really do. We've come all this way together, I don't want to break up a good thing now. As far as my attitude, it's gone. You need me, you got me. I'm sorry for how I've treated you."

She hesitated, obviously waiting for more. When she



realized that what she wanted to hear wasn't forthcoming, she said, "Okay. For now. Just in case I don't get a chance to speak to you before you leave, be careful on tour. Please." The last word was almost pleading.

"I will. I promise."

~ \* ~

Rob concentrated on the monitor as he watched the near-finished version of "Heaven Will Wait." It had been an exhaustive week and he barely had time to recover from his twenty-city international book tour when he arrived in Hollywood last Sunday.

"Heaven Will Wait" was a power ballad with strong vocals, awesome guitar, thrumming bass, and exacting drums. There was very little doubt that the song would make a large splash when it hit the airwaves. The video, Rob hoped, would fare just as well.

The video opened with a shot of huge, rolling clouds in a perfect sky. Then, as the music began, the camera dropped to the earth at an amazing velocity. The next shot was of a city street at midday with dozens of cars on the streets and countless pedestrians on the sidewalks. Next shot, a woman holding gun, the barrel still smoking, and her face drenched in her own tears. She was a very attractive, young girl who'd played a few bit parts on sitcoms and Broadway. While not incredibly talented, she was drop dead sexy. The camera moved to a bed, where two people lie dead. Both had gunshot wounds to their chests. One was Rob, the other a nondescript woman, assumedly naked, beneath the bloody sheets.

The next scene was a flashback of the shooter and Rob during happier times. Walking in the park, watching TV on the couch, and even making love in the shower. That part was particularly fun for Rob. Then, the video moved to Rob and the unknown woman dancing the horizontal mambo on a bed. The shooter walks in and fires the gun twice, killing Rob and the girl. Just before the video ended, the shooter placed the gun against her temple, and the screen went black, but as Rob's credit scrawled across the screen in white, handwritten cursive, a gunshot boomed. Whether the shooter had indeed shot herself or not, the audience couldn't know.

"Awesome, man," Trey said. The rest of the band and crew joined in and several clapped him on the back.

"Well, Rob, are you ready to be famous, certifiably famous?"

Rob hesitated, but only for a moment. "I hope so. I've been waiting my whole life to find out."

~ \* ~

Danielle waited as Nicholas opened the door for her. The car, a Mercedes, reeked of money, just as Nicholas Crawford himself did. He was a Wall Street broker. Just shy of forty, he apparently did very well for himself. He owned an apartment in Trump Towers, three cars and a small sailboat.

But he was a gentleman, through and through. They'd met at the opening of an art gallery last fall and slowly a courtship had developed. He had never been married, but Danielle could tell, by way of her womanly instinct, that he was serious about her. She was pretty sure a proposal would come soon. However, she wasn't sure, yet, what her answer would be.

Both had busy careers. Even with all her success with Robert Caulder, Danielle still had to be forward thinking. She'd amassed quite a roster of very talented and commercially viable writers. The agency had grown from just her and Glenda to a staff of four agents and two receptionists. As a matter of fact, Glenda now held one of those agent slots and had done very well in her own right. For the first time, Greer Literary Group was in the black and Danielle was comfortable with the profit she cleared. She represented some of the best writers of horror, romance, and crime fiction. While she was still searching for her Nora Roberts, she would do fine if she never found one.

But success didn't come easy or without its hardships. She often spent sixty hours or more in and out of the office, doing lunch and meetings. While she devoted a few hours on the weekends for leisure at home, most often she was at her desk working. That was why she and Nicholas fit so well together.

In his line of work, a seventy hour week was the rule, not the exception. They didn't bother one another with courtesy calls every single day. Most times, they only spoke on Thursdays or Fridays, and only to arrange a date or

finalize some type of weekend social plan.

They ate at the best restaurants, saw the best shows, and took the most exciting weekend trips. They'd learned to ski together and how to scuba dive.

Tonight, dinner was at an exclusive, five-star French restaurant. The meal was wonderful, and Nicholas charming as well. When they made it back to her place, and she stepped from the car, Nicholas let the valet park his car. She'd moved a year ago into a more desirable location and this place was high-class all the way.

"You're coming up?"

"You say that as if you'd rather I not."

"No. It's not that. I thought you were going into the office in the morning."

"I am. But morning's still a while off."

They walked through the lobby side by side, but not touching. At the elevator, Nicholas allowed her into the car first, and then entered it himself.

On the ascent, Danielle smelled his cologne. Spicy and brisk, just like a man's fragrance should smell. He was a nice enough man. Handsome in a sophisticated way. He dressed well, both for work and for play.

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. They stepped out and soon were at Danielle's apartment. She fished the key from her purse and opened the door.

He would probably spend the night. She was fine with that. But she knew that moments before she slipped into slumber, the last thought on her mind would not be of Nicholas Crawford. It would be of who it always was.

Rob Caulder.

~ \* ~

"Heaven Will Wait" debuted on MTV's Top Ten Countdown at number eight. The next day it was number six. Two weeks after its release it was number one. Rob got a lot of attention from the video. Much more than even he anticipated.

*Rolling Stone* did a feature on Razor Bone but much of the story included details about Rob and his writing career. Suddenly, Robert Caulder was a name known outside the circles of books and video games and horror movies. *People Magazine* even dedicated three pages to pictures and a short

piece on his appearance in the video.

Almost overnight he'd gone from a best-selling writer to a mainstream celebrity. Maybe only marginally, but he was on his way up.

He continued talking to and going out with Trey. After all, the man was very good to him. Not only with the video, but he'd also sprung for the trip to the Blue Herron.

But Trey hadn't appreciated how Rob stole the band's thunder from "Heaven Will Wait". It wasn't Rob's fault, of course. Trey chose him for the project. At first, the remarks were playful, teasing. Then they turned hateful and cruel. Finally, Rob had enough and said the hell with it.

He hadn't spoken to Trey in several weeks.

His social life had never been better. He was dating a musician named Felicity Gold. She had a great solo career as a mainstream Goth rocker. While she presented her music as dark and artistic, the teen- and college-age kids ate it up like candy. Her first two albums went platinum, and her newly released third album was well on its way. With long dark hair, hazel eyes, and a lot of eye makeup, Felicity could have passed for any industrial clubber. But look past that and you would see the body that a personal trainer had transformed into a masterpiece, A-list material.

When they'd been dating for about three months, though not monogamously, Felicity came to him with the suggestion that they record a duet.

"I can't sing."

"Sure you can. It'll be an easy part. You'll sound great."

"I don't even sing in the shower."

"So what? You've got a great voice. I'll work with you and I'll write something easy to sing." Felicity penned not only the lyrics but also the music to the majority of her albums. "What do you say?"

Rob already had stars in his eyes. There was only one thing he could say. "I'll give it a shot."

After that conversation, Rob did his very best to stay on Felicity's good side. While she toured almost continuously, she made it to New York often enough to see him. He was careful to be seen as a good boyfriend and often rented a room for the night in lieu of bringing women back to his

apartment. He wasn't completely sure of Felicity's faithfulness. With her on the road, it was next to impossible to tell, but he decided to give the illusion that she was the only woman in his life. Save for Danielle and Tabby, as far as Felicity knew, she was the only woman in his life.

Meanwhile, the paperback to *Bad Season* was released and was selling well. The hardcover edition of *Ghost Flower* hit most of the lists at number seven, and even higher on one or two.

It was December and yet another Christmas was rolling around. He took Felicity to British Columbia, Canada during her tour break. They rented a place out in the country.

It was both a white and happy Christmas. Snow fell and fires were built. They exchanged gifts. For him, Felicity bought an armload of presents. He received a new watch, an antique edition of *Dracula*, and several small items. He gave her a ten-carat diamond necklace. He knew she'd never wear diamond earrings; she had chrome studs in her ears. He also gave her countless smaller items ranging from a book about body-piercing to new games for her Playstation 3.

After exchanging gifts they smoked a joint together and watched as the flames in the fireplace licked the air.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said.

"What?"

"I've got one more for you."

"Really, babe, that was plenty."

"I'll be right back." She padded across the wood floor in her socks and retrieved a small, rectangular box, white with red ribbon, from behind a chair. She wore a smile ten miles wide as she brought it to him.

He opened it quickly. Inside was a sheaf of paper.

"What is it?" he asked, already stoned.

"It's our song," she said and kissed him. She tasted sweet and good, of cool northern air and tangy marijuana.

~ \* ~

*Close the curtains,  
Shut out the light,  
Slam the door,  
Tonight it's,  
Only you and I.*

*Darkness reigns,  
The clouds pour forth,  
Us together,  
The only reason worth,  
Living for.  
Now I've draped,  
Now I've draped,  
My world,  
My world away.  
Shadows speak to me,  
Ya gotta believe me.  
In a world of night,  
Screams are terrible,  
But worth the fright.  
Nevermore will the sun rise,  
Orgies in the sun,  
Now massacres in the dark,  
A world of chaos,  
The beating of two hearts.  
Now I've draped,  
Now I've draped,  
My world,  
My world away.*

*Death has come,  
Air gone from my lungs,  
Kill all, and then some.  
As my body decays,  
My soul escapes on silver moon rays.  
Now I've draped,  
Now I've draped,  
My world,  
My world away.  
Now I've draped,  
Now I've draped,  
My world,  
My world away.*

"Draped" was finished in late February. While the two had worked on it both together and separately, Rob found that his part, the chorus, was not very demanding. To his

utter surprise, the finished product sounded professional, even enjoyable. The words were wonderful and the song fit his public persona well.

It was a relatively simple song with a simple arrangement. While Felicity's voice was soft, precise, and ethereal, his was darker, deeper, and more resonant. The exacting guitar riff and the other instruments blended with their voices to make a supremely powerful, sinister anthem.

During that time, he attended parties, functions, and benefits with Felicity. Fortunately, his success kept him from being labeled a boy-toy and soon he and Felicity were scandalized across the supermarket tabloids. They were accused of everything. In one magazine, they were aliens from another planet bent on overtaking the world's entertainment industry. In another, they were spawns of Satan engaged in incestuous sin. In yet another, Rob and Felicity were simply hippy rejects from a sixties commune. Felicity proved wonderful for his public image. The media dubbed him The Master of Nightmares, and Felicity, America's Gothic Girl. Rob loved the attention, reveled in it.

He made connections in Hollywood, the music world, and even in public awareness.

As a matter of fact, he signed on with the National Literacy Council, of which Felicity was a member, only weeks before he appeared in court for the charges stemming from the theft of the Dodge Viper almost two years ago. He'd hired a top-gun lawyer from Manhattan and the man had delayed the case as long as possible. It was at his attorney's suggestion that he joined the literacy effort, as a matter of fact.

The trial was over quickly and ended in his favor, surprising everyone. Though he was found guilty of all charges, the judge agreed to allow Rob to work out a deal with the National Literacy Council. For each of his four charges, he would tape a public service announcement.

It was a better deal than Rob could have ever asked for. The proverbial slap on the wrist.

As he was sitting in his apartment on a Monday afternoon, his birthday actually, he got a phone call from Danielle. Felicity was on tour in Spain.

"You sitting down?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. Why, what's up?" Though Rob still depended heavily on Tabby's help, he dealt with Danielle himself, on everything. During that time, a spark of their earlier closeness had ignited. While they weren't exactly as friendly as in the beginning, they were much more than only civil.

"Good. There's no other way to say it. So I'll just come on out with it."

"That's solid. So come on out with it."

"*Bad Season* hits number one next Sunday on the *New York Times List*."

All the air was sucked from the room and Rob had to fight to find even the tiniest amount remaining.

"Really?"

"I promise. I just got the word. Congratulations."

"Thank...you," he said. Tears rolled from his eyes.

"Thank...you."

After hanging up with Danielle, he bounded from his chair. This was what he'd been striving for so very long. He would erupt like a roiling volcano if he didn't relieve the pressure.

He tried for over an hour to contact Felicity on her cell. Finally, when he got through and conveyed the good news, she became just excited as he.

"That's great, babe. I knew you'd get there." After a few moments of talking about his achievement, she asked, "So are you having a good birthday?"

"With the book news, yeah. Still, I wish you were here."

"I do, too. But I'll be in next week. I'm saving your gift for then. I want to give it to you in person. If you know what I mean."

Rob laughed. "Yeah, I do. You're still stopping by New York, then." While Rob and Felicity were dating seriously, she still maintained her home in Southern California. The cross country trips were expensive, but since they both had money to burn, they enjoyed the space that living a continent away afforded them. Though sometimes, it was more an obstacle than a blessing. Rob considered moving to California, but had yet to make up his mind.

"Of course. I'm already burning up inside for you."



"Likewise, I promise."

After a few minutes more, the call ended. While the edge had been slightly worn off his enthusiasm, he was still anxious and hyper. He wanted to celebrate. He wanted to paint the town red. And he wanted to see Danielle.

He showered and dressed and was just heading out when the phone rang. He picked it up without checking the Caller ID screen, immediately regretting not doing so.

"Hello," he said.

"Robert, son? Is that you?" Immediately, a huge weight crushed him. It had been a very long time since he'd spoken to his mother. At times, that part of his life felt like no more than a dream, steadily disintegrating as time marched on.

"Yes, Mom. It's me." He held the phone after that, not saying a word.

"That's all you've got to say? It's been almost three years."

"More like two."

"Oh," she said. "Well, happy birthday."

"Thanks," he spoke lowly.

"Uh, how have you been?"

"Wonderful. I appreciate you asking, but I was just on my way out. Do you mind if I call you back?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Though, truth be told, calling your mother is probably the most distant thing from your mind. What with you living in that big, tall building. With all your money, and fame, and sin."

"Look, Mom. I really don't feel like getting into this with you. Know what I mean?"

"I didn't call you to give you a hard time, nor did I call to lecture you. I heard your song. You're the talk of the town, did you know that?"

"No." That much was true. But it made him very happy. All those people who thought he wasn't worth a wooden nickel, all those that thought he was chasing a fool's dream, well they saw now, didn't they? Yes, sir'ee, they were eating their crow, and Rob hoped it was raw and tasted like ashes in their mouth.

"Anyway. I was disturbed by the song. Not that you didn't sing well. You sang very well. And that's what I'd like

to talk to you about.”

The album with “Draped” wasn’t due out for a month or so, but the lead single was released to stir up interest for Felicity’s album. While it wasn’t available for download, at least not legally, it was available on many websites as streaming audio. How his mother had been able to find it was a mystery. The video for the song hadn’t even been shot yet.

“You want a copy of the CD? Is that it?”

“No. That is certainly not it. What I’ve got to talk to you about is very important, son. I think you should listen to me—”

Rob hung up. With a heavy sigh, he left the apartment, locking the door behind him.

## ***Sixteen***

Rose Callender was a gifted author and, Danielle hoped, soon to be a successful one. Rose's manuscript, *Not a Moment Too Soon*, lay sprawled across Danielle's large glass desktop. She was doing a read-through, perhaps her fifth or maybe even sixth. She'd put a lot of time into editing this 'script. After she finished this last go-round, she planned to send a proposal to several different houses and was confident she'd have a sale within a few months.

If it sold, it would be Rose's first published novel. Danielle still derived quite a thrill from making a sale, but even more so when it involved an author's debut novel. There was nothing like telling a person that their lifelong dream of becoming a professional writer had finally come true.

She wondered if *Not a Moment Too Soon* would soon join the other books on the shelf across her office. That walnut shelf displayed the published titles of her clients. Though Robert Caulder's were displayed most prominently, her shelf was full of books by other authors, as well.

The thought of adding yet another title to that wall always made her enthusiastic. Now, with Rob finally hitting number one on the New York list, even if it was only paperback, she was convinced that the Greer Literary Group would continue its exceptional growth. Danielle likened herself to the agent who had discovered Nicholas Sparks, Theresa Parks. She'd left her then-employer and opened her own shop. Now she was not only highly respected in the field, but also managed to turn an amazing profit.

While money was by no means the most important

thing in life, it brought respect and power. Danielle would be a liar if she said she didn't crave those things. Some might say she was searching for her father's acceptance, but Danielle would be quick to disagree. She, like every woman, wanted to be independent, able to not only stand equal with the rulers of corporate America—men—but to even surpass them. It was a matter of pride, pure and simple, and if she could find happiness along the way by achieving that ultimate goal, then so much the better.

Finally finished, she stacked the manuscript on the edge of her desk, and turned in her chair. The huge plate-glass window in her office afforded her a grand view of the city, but she didn't even glimpse that way. She stood from her chair and moved over to the bookshelf.

She ran a finger along the spines of several books, all of them Robert's work, and selected the latest hardcover, *Ghost Flower*. On the back of the dust jacket was a full page photo of Rob. The shot was one of the author in an old graveyard with tall, spire-like monuments and huge marble markers. Rob was striking in the photograph, as he was in person. Tall and lean, his once short hair now covered his ears and had a permanent disheveled look that some paid salons hundreds to replicate. His skin was tanned, his eyes bright and intelligent. But the look on his face was one of true mystery. A very handsome man, indeed.

Then she remembered him at lunch several months ago, looking like death warmed over. She'd never seen him look so bad.

While Danielle wasn't sure if he'd left hardcore drugs alone, his appearance had improved since then. Despite that, however, she still saw signs of something. In his voice on the phone, or the look in his eyes when they met face to face, there was a hint of detachment, of a chemically-induced distance.

Her heart went out to him. She heard that creative people were more susceptible to weakness than less imaginative individuals. Like Hemingway, Jim Morrison, and even her father. For a long time, she considered that line of reasoning an excuse. Just a way to get away with doing harmful things to themselves and others. Like her. More times than she could remember, her father had staggered

home drunk, smelling of whisky and worse. And more than once he had taken out his frustrations on her.

But now, she wasn't too sure it was normal, creative behavior. When they first met, Rob was sharp, quick, delightful and sweet. But no longer. He was younger then, not yet twenty-nine. Was this new personality a product of maturity, of his new station in life, or of drug abuse? Of course, there was really no way to be sure.

Still, she couldn't help thinking about it, about him. It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to commit to Nicholas and other men since Robert Caulder had come into her life. But despite his many faults, no one quite measured up to him. No matter what happened, she knew that deep down he was a good, decent man with a good heart. And his looks didn't hurt a bit.

But she was being foolish, even girl-like. She took one last look at the face on the back of the book and placed it back in its proper place.

She cursed herself for her thoughts. Throughout her life, Danielle had been guided by her head, not her heart. She wasn't only smart, but wise beyond her years. She'd made it this far with logic and willpower and she wasn't about to throw it all away for a man.

She'd ignored her better judgment and answered the call of her heart once...only once. But that one time had almost ruined her career.

Falling in love with her boss had been a huge mistake. Naturally, he'd been married. Her actions couldn't be justified as either naiveté or impulsivity. She'd known better. A married man *and* her boss. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to see that only misery awaited someone who traveled that path. But she was blinded by love, or at least that's what she thought at the time. Looking back, it had only been her stupidity and his charm. He lost nothing, she almost lost it all.

Almost. But not quite.

Just because she thought that their relationship would be different.

Just as, on occasion, she believed that Robert and she could make and keep something real.

No, it was beyond her to even attempt.

No matter what, she had to remain strong, to keep her resolve.

She glanced out the window, clearing her mind.

Then, someone knocked on the door.

~ \* ~

Rob wasn't really sure why he'd come. He wanted to celebrate, but not with just anyone, with Danielle. That bespoke more than he was willing to consider at the moment. He was remarkably clear-headed for so late in the afternoon. Nothing synthetic or unnatural flowed through his system. That too, made certain things more obvious.

The Greer Literary Group was a bustle of activity. So busy, it took little urging to persuade Danielle's secretary to allow him to announce himself to her boss.

Danielle told him to enter. He pushed the door open wide and smiled as he entered.

"Rob, what...what are you doing here?"

"Sorry about dropping in, but I thought you might like to have a night on the town with me."

"I...I don't know."

"Are you okay?" he asked, noticing the strange look on her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. And I meant to call you back. I forgot all about today being your birthday. One heck of a surprise wasn't it, hitting number one and all."

"You're telling me. So how about it? Dinner, maybe a drink or two?"

"I don't think so, Rob." She'd been standing when he'd entered, now she strode back over to her desk and sat down.

"How about a movie, then, or even ice cream?"

"Rob, I would really love to but I've got...plans."

"Oh," he said. "What about after you're finished with your...plans?"

"Really, it'd be too late. How about a rain check?"

Rob tried his best to keep a smile on his face, but he wasn't nearly as sparkly as when he'd entered. He had actually thought that since it was his birthday and he was a number one best-seller that his agent would agree to go out. Not for a real date, of course, but at least out.

"I guess I'll find something else to do," he said. Then, without another word, he turned and left.

He vaguely heard Danielle calling his name, but he didn't stop.

He was tired of her games. He decided on the way down in the elevator he would look for a new agent. He heard that some lawyers specialized in author contracts, and they only asked for ten percent commission instead of the standard fifteen for agents. It was only a five percent difference, but hell, that added up. Besides, it was a damn good excuse.

~ \* ~

She couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Rob's pitiful face in her mind.

Perhaps she should've gone ahead and had dinner with him. After all, it was his birthday. And he'd reached the top of the lists. A first for her, actually. Had she been too hard on him? Had she been cruel?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps.

She left work not long after Rob walked out. She stopped by the market to pick up fresh items for dinner, but when she got home, she didn't feel like preparing a meal. Instead she dined on Ben and Jerry's ice cream and Jif peanut butter.

After that, she watched some television, mostly E and CNN, but nothing held her interest for very long. She kept thinking about her number one client.

She readied herself for bed, taking a shower instead of her customary bubble bath, but even an Ambien couldn't ease her mind and send her to sleep.

She stared at the ceiling for a very, very long time.

Then she made a decision.

She got out of bed, drank two cups of instant coffee, black, and dressed.

She hailed a cab down at the street and away she went.

The taxi arrived in less than twenty minutes and a warm rain was falling as she stepped out. She'd been plagued by second thoughts the entire trip here, but second thoughts were nothing new to her. Her life had been a maze of regrets and missed opportunities.

She was damned if she was going to miss this one.

Her heart beat was like a raging bird locked inside a cage as she rode the elevator up. The doors opened and she stepped out. At Rob's door, she could hear muffled music. It was some kind of heavy metal, but since Danielle was a fan of eighties hair band music, she didn't recognize it.

She stood still at the door. Her hand was a fist, ready to knock.

Was she ready for this? And exactly what was *this*?

Was she here to apologize for her behavior or was she here for something else, something more?

She knew what she wanted, what she'd wanted for such a long time.

After a while, she knocked.

No one answered. Of course, the music was so loud a knock was probably drowned out.

She rang the bell. Once, twice, a third time.

The door began to open. "Rob, I'm so sorry. Why don't we—"

The person staring back at her was not Robert Caulder. Not even close.

For one, it was a she, not a he.

She had dark, raven hair, dark skin, and slanted eyes.

Sleek. Beautiful.

And naked.

The door opened wider. Rob stood there, naked as well, his chest covered in a shiny layer of perspiration. His hair was mussed and his eyes were wild.

"D-Danielle," he muttered. Over his shoulder, Danielle saw another naked Asian girl that looked identical to the one standing at the door. "Uh, these are my friends Kiko and Miko. They're uh, they're twins."

"I would never have guessed," Danielle managed. A sharp pain creased her heart, taking her breath. She couldn't speak another word. She couldn't even think. Her world crumbled. It was like a boulder had crashed down onto her chest, suffocating her. *Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!* she thought when her mind cleared. *I should've expected this. I really should have.*

Tears threatened, but she wouldn't let Rob and these two...whores, sluts, see that. No way, Jose.

"You bastard," she said, seething. Before she could



catch herself, her hand sprang out and clapped against Rob's cheek with stinging ferocity. The impact reverberated deep down within her arm. Then she turned and ran. She ran to the elevator and straight through the lobby. Out into the rain and the unforgiving night.

Only then did she allow herself to shed tears, and they came for a very long time.

## ***Seventeen***

Rob not only performed "Draped" with Felicity but was also a presenter at the MTV Video Music Awards in New York City. The song caught on like wildfire. When it hit, it hit hard.

Their performance was impeccable. On cue and in the beat, the song ended to a standing ovation.

After the song, it was backstage for a quick change of clothes, then back out to present Video of the Year to the band, Hinder.

After that, he and Felicity found their seats in the audience and watched the rest of the show. When the award ceremony concluded, they were transported, via limousine, to the after-party. Rob was stoned out of his mind by midnight. For the most part, he staggered through groups, bumping into several people. He worked his way to a seat at a table. The after-party was in a loud, dark club in a part of New York he knew very little about. He'd never been here, but he knew many of the guests.

Chad Kroeger from Nickelback.

Lars Ulrich from Metallica.

Amy Lee from Evanescence.

Lindsay Lohan.

Ben Stiller, the one and only.

Jay-Z and Beyonce.

Akon and a crew of his guys.

More people of that caliber.

Then there were those who had no business here. People who had done nothing in music, only hung on like mice to a scrap of cheese. Either buying or begging their way in. They made Rob sick. Wanna-bes that would never be.

Then he saw something out of the corner of his eye he didn't like. Didn't like at all. Some sleazy guy in a shiny suit and a bald head was talking up his girl. *His* girl, Felicity.

Rob was on his feet, and though he listed to one side, he eventually made his way to where the two were getting awfully cozy over in the corner.

Felicity looked good tonight, exceptionally so. Her black dress was skin tight, her breasts full and pushed out by a well-designed bra. The color of her lips was dark red, almost scarlet. Just looking at her got him excited. But the man next to her just enraged him.

He saw the shocked look in Felicity's eyes, like a deer caught in the blaze of headlights. It was like she *knew*, just *knew*, what was about to happen. She even raised her arms in protest. But it was too late.

Rob's fist connected with a crack on the man's chin. He must've pinched a nerve, because the man fell unconscious to the floor. But Rob was far from finished. He straddled the man and rained down a flurry of blows. The man's nose crumpled under his hands, the cartilage twisted and snapped.

Satisfied, he stood, grabbed Felicity by the arm, and brought her close. "If you haven't guessed, we're finished." He flung her away.

Then Rob stormed through the crowd. He erupted onto the city streets before the bouncers could grab hold of him. Far in the distance, sirens wailed.

"Fuck," Rob muttered under his breath. He'd just kissed his connection to rock stardom goodbye, would probably face criminal charges, and would no doubt be labeled as a violent psychotic. But what the hell? Bad publicity was, as they say, better than none at all.

~ \* ~

Three hours later, Rob was at the airport, luggage in tow. He'd thrown in everything he thought he might need. Clothing, a jump drive with several of his novels and other projects stored on it, some toiletries, and a handful of his medications.

He strode onto the plane as if he were king of the world. Morning was just breaking through the night sky, and the lights of nearby planes gave the world an almost surreal

appearance.

Rob's head settled back onto the headrest as the Boeing accelerated down the runway, the view on the opposite side of his window was a blur of light and dark, of neon and sky.

Rob thought nothing of the life he was finally leaving behind. His mind did not ponder Felicity, Danielle, or anyone else he'd met. He was on a journey. A quest for a better life, one he could now easily afford. A golden dream, a life in the sun.

He was heading for California, but not for a visit. He wanted to seek out a home, to put his feet down, to take a breather before beginning the next phase of his career. The phase that, he hoped, would not only satisfy his financial needs for life, but also bring him the fame and recognition reserved for only the brightest stars. Maybe he would even become a legend that would endure long after his death.

He dozed off over the Midwest. Several Valium ensured a deep, peaceful slumber.

~ \* ~

Danielle Greer sipped her drink, room temperature Chianti, and savored the smoked flavor of her beef as her knife sliced the red center. The once elusive "power lunch" was now commonplace for her since her firm was finally respected among the city's biggest and oldest established agencies.

Danielle had expanded the agency again. She was able to attract the best of the industry with a tantalizing salary, and benefits package including a generous expense account and top commission rates. But she still ran the business, no matter how sharp and talented her employees. Danielle attended to everything from the minutest details to the most crucial decisions. So far, the strategy served her well. Danielle Greer was a name to be reckoned with. And though Robert Caulder was no longer her client, her firm represented many bestsellers and were always on the lookout to add more.

As now.

Danny Sigmund had a long, established career in the science fiction field. He'd penned his first novel at twenty-one, nearly twenty years ago. He was prolific. Since he

published his first book, he'd spit out a minimum of two paperbacks a year. A considerable amount of his backlist was still in print, as well. Some of the larger independent booksellers even had entire sections dedicated to Sigmund. He was, at least to his fans, the modern-day Isaac Asimov or Arthur C. Clarke. Recently his publisher, Bantam, released his newer works in hardcover. Those editions sold reasonably well, but Danny was quite unhappy by both Bantam's failure to push the book and his long-time agent's failure to stand up for him with the publisher.

"As I was saying, Ms. Greer," Danny said as he wiped his mouth. "For nearly a decade, the young adult and teen markets have been saturated with fantasy. Thanks to the likes of Harry Potter, Lemony Snicket, J. R. R. Tolkien, and hoards of others. While I am a huge fan of the genre, the publishing business is a creature of habit. Hot subjects last only so long, and as it passes another comes to take its place. I'm sure you'd agree."

"I would," Danielle answered, savoring her roast beef. "And you feel that science fiction will soon replace fantasy?"

"It's the only logical choice. The time of dragons and boy wizards is passing. Readers of all ages are on the prowl for something different. From the outside looking in, it could well be crime suspense, horror, or even romance. But I've been in this business long enough to recognize the signs. Readers will always seek something out of the ordinary, something to aid their escape, if only temporary, from the real world. For instance, the last J.K. Rowling book broke tremendous records, as did Paolini's final *Inheritance* installment. But both examples are at the very end of their sagas. During this lull, couldn't a new genre emerge at the top of the lists?"

"It's certainly a thought," Danielle conceded. They finished their meals and drained the last of the drinks. The server came and Danny ordered dessert, while Danielle asked for a refill of her Chianti. "Let me ask you this, Mr. Sigmund."

"Danny, please."

"Okay, Danny. You're prepared, fully prepared, to end your agreement with both Bantam and your current agent?"

"I'm not being coy, but I think that's a double-edged

question. However, I'll answer to the best of my ability. I'm quite prepared to end my agreement with Judson Keiser, my agent. While he's done an outstanding job of representing both my work and me over the last...fifteen years, I believe, I feel I've outgrown his ability to get my work a fair shake. With Bantam? I'm not sure how to answer that. I was hoping that you might be able to write a contract with them that could get the concessions that I seek."

"You're partial to Bantam?"

"A bit." Danny's smile was not very attractive. But in truth, neither was he. If Danielle had met the man on the street, without any idea of his long and storied career as a sci-fi writer, she could have guessed his interest in things both technological and alien. The quintessential geek, Sigmund would have fit perfectly in with the cast of *Revenge of the Nerds*. His dark hair was slicked back and his skin deathly pale. While he didn't wear a pocket protector, at least not that she could see, his glasses were thick, his eyes deeply sunken, and he had the personality of a high school chess club president. But all that aside, he was a very nice guy and more to the point, his books sold very well. Not just to sci-fi enthusiasts but to the general reading public as well.

"Care to explain the reason?"

"I like their logo."

Danielle almost choked on her wine. She started to laugh out loud before she saw that her prospective client was serious. Completely. "Their logo?"

"Yes, the rooster. Plus, I've met a bunch of wonderful people there. I believe if you talk to them, you could convince them that every dollar they spend promoting my hardcovers and subsequent paperbacks, will come back to them four or five times over. Statistics show that seventy-five percent of first time readers of my books return, can you think of anyone else that can say that?"

She couldn't and told him as much. Potentially, everything Danny Sigmund said could come to pass. But fads were dangerous and attempting to predict them even more so. The big publishers in New York weren't known to operate on the cutting edge, usually only backing a writer after certified success. But Sigmund's books would appeal to a much larger audience than he now had. Sigmund was a

serious promoter of his novels, using the Internet and conventions as well as free launching boards for his myriad science fiction sagas and stand alone novels.

It could be done. And it would take someone just like her to swing it. Of course, it wouldn't be easy, but then, if it were, it would have happened by now.

If she pulled it off, it would mean a big payday. A very big one. Already, Danielle was conceptualizing terms. Multi-million dollar advances, promo budgets, and plenty of buzz, not only industry but mainstream as well. The culture was finally in favor of the printed word. With the successes over the last several years, consumers were finally forgoing the DVD racks and video game counters for the book section. And publishers, agents, and authors everywhere were showing profit. She liked to think that she had a significant, if small, part in that shift.

J.K. Rowling, Dan Brown, and James Patterson were selling books, movies, and video games. Robert Caulder, on the other hand, was selling an *image*. Caulder was the first author-turned-celebrity of this millennia and doing it like it had never been done before. Not only did he have hit books, games, and movies, but songs as well. He was, for all intents and purposes, the first full-fledged superstar who had gotten his start from the publishing industry. He was as well known in Los Angeles as he was in New York City, and a household name in the states in between.

But enough of Robert Caulder.

Consciously, Danielle pushed the mental image of him away. His name was a curse to her, haunting her in the dark of night and the bright light of day. To her, he was truly the Prince of the American Nightmare. But Danielle didn't fear the horrors that sprang from his imagination, but from the man himself.

"What kind of figures did you have in mind?" she asked Sigmund, returning her attention to the matter at hand.

"Well, my last hardcover release was four months ago. In that time, I've gone through two printings. The third edition is almost exhausted. I'm hearing from booksellers around the country that availability is a huge issue. As you know, it's hard to sell what you don't have. The problem, as

I see it, is the small runs. The first edition was produced in a run of forty thousand, the second, forty-five, and this edition, the third, mind you, at thirty. All in all, that equals to one hundred, ten thousand copies. Nothing to scoff at, I understand, but the last three books have been victims of the same sort of short-sightedness. There is no doubt, at least in my mind, that an initial printing in the two-hundred thousand neighborhood isn't beyond reason."

Danielle chose her words carefully. It was painfully evident that while Danny Sigmund was a very popular niche writer, his opinion of himself and his works were highly inflated. A big payday was possible, but it would require a multi-book commitment. It was obvious that she and Sigmund were thinking along different lines.

"Danny. You're a very good writer. While I'm not a fan of your genre, per se, I have read some of your work recently and have found it to be interesting and endearing. Unlike most science fiction, your stories, while relying on speculative elements, are not bogged down by the pure science that you interject. In essence, anyone from the class brain to the high-school drop-out can find enjoyment in your books. But I must stress this point: you are largely a paperback author. The BookScan records show that your books sell at an amazing pace when the cost of that book is between seven and eight bucks. A hardcover price, twenty-five bucks on average, is a lot harder to come by, and according to my research, your third printing is far from expiring." She raised her hand to stop his interjection. "I'm sure you've heard that booksellers don't have the copies in hand, but that's not because it isn't available. Whether it's a sales issue or distribution issue, I can't say. The fact is Bantam has done its part. What we would have to do is win their confidence, whether we do that in a smart way or the hard way, well, that's up to you. The fact of the matter is neither Bantam, nor anyone else for that matter, is going to put up that kind of money without a product that will break through barriers and fight its way into the mainstream, or without a big commitment from you. When I say big, I mean a five or six book commitment."

Danny's face reddened. "How dare you sit there and try to tell me how the business that I've been in for twenty



years works! I've been putting out novels since you had Similac on your breath."

Danielle took all this and waited for more. "I am in no way doubting your knowledge of the business. Writing is as much a mystery to me as space travel must've been to Columbus. But one thing I do know, Mr. Sigmund, is publishing. While you may write novels that captivate people's wildest dreams, I have to take that and translate it into dollars. I have to outline a proposal that, beyond you or I, will contribute to the house's bottom line. That's no easy task in a world of pod cast novels and self-publishing, where people would rather pay three bucks to rent a DVD than pay the retail price of a book or the ticket price for a theatrical release.

"You either have to give me one book that'll make history or six that'll sell well enough to cover cost, distribution, returns, and hell, even the salaries of the salespeople.

"What do you say?" Danielle was close to breathless, but this was one of her favorite parts of her job: hardball. She considered herself very astute at the finer workings of manipulation. She was banking that deep down Sigmund knew that his writing just wasn't up to snuff and that when it came time to put it on the line, he wouldn't have the courage.

She was right.

"Okay," he conceded, but he did so reluctantly. "I've got a few manuscripts yet to be submitted. Three total, I believe, and a fourth close to completion. So, realistically, I could say that five novels would not be beyond reason to contract. To be honest, with or without you I could more than likely sell any of those four for one- to two-hundred grand. That's without an agent, without anyone "in the know", as one might say. So, with that in mind, I'd say, three hundred K a pop. That's—"

"One-point-five million," Danielle furnished. She rapped her fingernails on the table.

"Exactly." To his credit, Danny recovered from his earlier outburst like a champ.

"That's a big number." That was true. While a big payday, at least in her mind, was more like a half-mil to a

full mil. "But I'm sure if Bantam's not interested in procuring your work that is, as yet, without contract, that we could find another house that would be."

"So we have a deal?" he asked, extending his hand.

Danielle took his hand and shook it. "I believe we do." Already she was computing her commission.

## ***Eighteen***

The black Porsche 911 zoomed up Pacific Coast Highway much faster than the posted speed limit. The sun was setting over the ocean, blessing the water with a reflection of burning fire on a sea of diamonds.

The top was down and the wind cut through Robert Caulder's hair. The feeling of freedom was a luxury, a privilege everyone should experience at least once. From the car's sound system, Godsmack's "Voodoo" blared, concealing the sound of the tires on the asphalt. From several hundred feet below, waves crashed against the shore.

Life was wonderful. Life was awesome.

Rob followed the broken lines of the highway for about half an hour, amazed by the light traffic. Then his turn came into view.

Surrounded on either side by two towering queen palms, the gate to his private drive was fashioned much like a medieval drawbridge. Operated by multiple keypads within the house as well as one positioned at each side of the gate, Rob also had a remote in the car. Everyone that was granted access to his house on a routine basis had their individual codes. If the wrong code was entered, however, the authorities would be electronically and automatically notified.

With a flick of the remote, the rustic bridge lowered over a ravine that was ten feet wide and ten feet deep. To both sides of the drawbridge the perimeter of his property was protected by high stone walls with wireless motion-activated cameras every ten feet along the entire circumference.

The drive itself was oven-fired brick and ran below

twin rows of towering palms, much like the famous Beverly Hills drag. The driveway ended in a large circle, surrounding a towering fountain. A large "C" was the fountain's centerpiece, and clear, cool water flowed down the etched stone surfaces. The house itself was like something straight from a fairy tale. Modeled after a fantastical castle, the house was a huge behemoth of a place, with soaring ballistae and medieval and ancient features. Constructed of a light-colored stone, the entire hulking home shimmered in the west coast sun.

After he'd purchased the property, construction crews labored almost three years to complete his vision, working seven-day weeks. The architect was from England, a true student of the style. The price tag was lofty, but Rob considered it well worth it. The Caulder Estate had been featured in countless magazines and two episodes of MTV's *Cribs*.

The landscaping and outside amenities were just as grand. The rolling green lawns were festooned with striking and wondrous beds and gardens, adding to the land's natural appeal and regal majesty. In the back, a huge concrete patio with raised decking overlooked an expansive pool. In three areas within the pool, large Grecian columns rose skyward. Out past the pool and concrete, the lawn ventured on until the end of the property where a huge, steep cliff, reached out over the rolling Pacific.

The house required a staff of five full-time and occasional temporary help. Tabby, Rob's personal assistant, moved into a smaller, matching structure several acres from the main house. Her and her husband's children were grown and scattered across the country. It had taken very little needling to convince Tabby and her husband Thomas to make the transcontinental move. Besides, he paid her well and offered them a much grander lifestyle than they were used to.

But Tabby was worth every red cent. Without her assistance, Rob feared he would lose track of his plethora of commitments, appointments, and promises.

Very seldom did he arrive home alone.

But to tell the truth, sex, once a great joy for him, had lost much of its appeal. It was more about who he bedded

now, instead of the physical pleasure. It wasn't even strictly the woman's—or women's—appearance anymore. She would either have to be an A-list actress, musician, or socialite. If those weren't available, he went for something a bit less, but definitely something more than the common man could achieve.

The last three years passed in a blurry clip. His advances grew with each novel published. Just this last release, *End of Innocence*, reached number one on nearly every list. His most recent movie was the summer's blockbuster, in which he played a critically-acclaimed supporting role. He graced the cover of *Rolling Stone* twice. "Draped" was certified a platinum single for online downloads. He had accompanied the band of the moment, Shark Bait, into the studio and recorded the vocals for a cover of Black Sabbath's *N.I.B.* which had, in time, reached number two on the *Billboard* charts.

He appeared on Leno, Letterman, Ellen, and Oprah. He visited Howard Stern in the Sirius Satellite Radio studios. He hosted the *People's Choice Awards* and was a presenter for the *Emmy's*. One of his favorite stints had been as the host for the Fuse Television's broadcast of *Fangoria's Chainsaw Awards*.

The last video game released on one of his books received *Electronic Gaming Monthly's* prestigious "Game of the Year" award.

He'd also taken an interest in the stock market. He discovered that with a lot of money to play with, it was relatively simple to make even more money. To his surprise, his ability to pick stocks that were about to erupt came naturally to him.

All in all, his net worth was approaching fifty million dollars.

Not too bad for a former college dropout cum security guard.

The sight of the car parked in the circular drive surprised him. While he had many visitors—more than he cared for, actually—the green Quest with the rental company tag just didn't fit anyone he knew.

Not bothering to pull the Porsche into the garage, he killed the engine and jumped out. By the time he made it to

the front door, Garvin, his butler, had opened the door and stepped out to meet him.

"Sir, may I have a moment?"

Rob immediately noticed the serious look on Garvin's face. While usually introverted, the butler carried an almost perpetual look of peace and serenity. But not now.

"Whose car is that, Garvin?"

Garvin cleared his throat. "The lady identified herself as your mother."

It felt like a boulder had been slapped to Rob's chest. But anger quickly simmered to boiling and overrode the astonishment. "My *mother*? You opened the gate to the first whack job that purports herself to be my mother? Not only that, you invite her inside for coffee?"

"Not coffee. Tea, Robert." The voice came from behind his butler. Robert jerked to look over Garvin's shoulder, his face beet red and burning. He opened his mouth to snap at the voice.

But when he saw the face of Kathy Caulder the boulder was not simply slapped to his chest, but pushed through it. "M-mom...", was all he could manage.

"I need to talk to you, son," Kathy said. She looked toward Garvin. "Alone."

Rob nodded, which was all he could do. He took the lead as his mother followed him into the den.

The better part of five years had passed, or maybe six, since he'd seen this woman. Oh, she'd tried. She'd even outright asked if she could visit, or if he might make the trip home. Rob's father died two summers ago; he now hoped Tabby had sent flowers.

Though he hadn't seen her in such a long time, they'd spoken sporadically over the years. Mostly when Rob was too preoccupied to check the caller ID. When she did manage to get through, the conversations were usually short and terse. It wasn't as if he had any aggression built up toward her, it was just that that part of his life was over and he didn't want to be reminded of it. Not even by the woman that had given him life and raised him the best that she could.

So, at best he was indifferent with Kathy. At worst, rude.

But the sight of her cracked the wall he'd built

between him and his past. It was as if a light now shone onto darkened images of what was.

He led her to the upstairs library. Both of the two main floors had large studies, but he favored the second-story one. A bit smaller, but no less lavishly decorated, it was the one room in the house that no one but those closest to him ever caught a glimpse of. Why was he taking this woman whom he no longer considered his parent, his only remaining parent at that, to such an exclusive section of his home? Was the crack in the wall widening? He hoped not. He'd done very well without such encumbrances and wanted to continue doing so.

"Please," he said. "Have a seat." She did. Kathy took a seat in a high, wing back leather chair. Rob continued on to his desk and sat in the chair. At his back was a large wall-to-wall window facing the Pacific Ocean. The small library was his working office. Richly adorned, the room had the look of old family money. Scarlet tapestries hung between the shelving. The floors, polished hardwood, were covered with both Persian and Asian rugs. The desk was a huge block of mahogany with detailed walnut inlays. Frames on the wall held all his book art, movie art, music art, magazine covers, and pictures of Rob with the most sought after personalities—everyone from NASCAR champions to international delegates. In the center of the office was an antique globe, huge and detailed, suspended on rods of dark, shiny wood, and secured with brass fittings.

Rob scrutinized Kathy a moment before speaking. He tented his fingers in front of him as if in deep thought. "You look well," he said finally, though he had to force himself to lie.

Without a word, Kathy placed a small duffel bag into her lap. He hadn't seen it before. Apparently, he'd been so astonished at the sight of the woman in his home he missed the little details. She unzipped it slowly, carefully. Suddenly, Rob realized how much older she looked than the last time he'd seen her. Older and frailer.

"I want to show you something. But first, please listen to this." Kathy pulled a small MP3 player from the bag and placed a speaker into the headphone jack. Evidently familiar with the device's operation, music soon plumed from the

small, cheap speakers. A guitar riff, then drums, then bass. A small break and the song picked up. When the lyrics finally began, Rob felt a shiver finger up his spine.

He listened, dumbstruck, as the deep, rich voice sang a song he'd never heard before, but he could almost predict the next line, the next beat, into the chorus. Kathy was silent during the song. When it finished, she replaced the device in the bag and looked back up into her son's eyes with strong gray eyes. There were tears in them. The tears stung Rob unexpectedly.

"That song," Rob said. "The voice is so..."

"Familiar?"

"Yes."

"As well it should be. Sounds a lot like yours, don't it?"

"Yes. Who, who was it?"

"His name was Johnny Krueger. And he was from your father."

A million questions bombarded Rob. Hundreds of thousands of accusations, half-thoughts, and fears.

"But Gary?"

"Gary Caulder was a good man, one of the best I ever met. And while he did his best, he was not your father."

"Krueger. Johnny Krueger," Rob muttered, trying to place the name. He'd heard it before, he knew he had. Had he heard the song before? Maybe without realizing it? Perhaps, but he didn't think so.

"He was the front man for Amber August."

Of course, Rob thought. Amber August was one of the biggest groups of the seventies. Somehow, however, he had missed their entire catalogue. But he knew a little. They were the rough equivalent to the British band Black Sabbath, Krueger the American Ozzy Osbourne.

Rob was both amazed and appalled. Amazed he came from such stock. Appalled he'd lived this long without knowing. And for what reason?

"Why?" The word hung in the air, heavy and thick.

"Why?" he asked again, this time with much more force.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you keep this from me?"

"I had to, son. I had to."

"Don't you dare call me 'son'. You've lied to me my entire life. You kept me from my father. Gary and you both.



A bunch of fucking liars." His finger poked the air.

Kathy Caulder jumped to her feet so fast, Rob started. "Let me tell you this, you ungrateful bastard. Gary Caulder loved you more than Johnny ever would or ever could. Johnny Krueger was mixed up, doped up, and screwed up. Talented, he was, but that alone couldn't make him human. I followed him around like a lost puppy for years. Before he was famous, he loved me. I truly believed that. Even called me Lily. Said I reminded him of the most perfect flower that God ever created. But the record deal changed him. He became another person, no, a monster.

"He didn't care for anyone after that, not even himself. He swallowed drugs instead of food, went to bed with anything that crawled. But I finally found him. Holed up at a cheap motel in the Midwest. We slept together that night and for the briefest moment I was happy again. Happy like I hadn't been in years. I thought that when I woke the next morning that somehow, someday, we could work it out. But morning never came for us. I woke to what I was sure was a horrendous thunderclap, only that wasn't what it was. Oh God, how I wished that was all it had been. But it was something much, much worse.

"It was a gunshot. Johnny Krueger, the love of my life, had placed a gun in his mouth and finally swallowed the pill that took his life.

She paused, staring hard into Rob's eyes. Rob swallowed down a lump of guilt, or maybe pure horror.

"I found out I was pregnant a few weeks later."

Rob attempted to connect the dots in the story. Trying to make sense out of scattered details.

"My father killed himself?"

"Yes. Only hours after your conception. But the more I think about it, it wasn't really his fault."

"Not his fault? My father kills himself, my mother lies to me, and I'm raised by a man that you shackled up with. What part of that isn't his fault?"

"Don't you ever speak ill of Gary again. Do you hear me? *Never again!*" Though he was closer to thirty-five than five, Rob flinched.

"Your father had trouble. A lot of it. He was haunted by terrible headaches, by awful visions."

Suddenly the pieces fit. Rob stood. "My father, he—"

"Crashed his motorcycle on a rainy September morning. Helmets weren't the law then, and he didn't wear one. Was in a coma for two weeks. When he finally woke, he said it was like living a never ending nightmare. For months, he slipped closer and closer to insanity. Then a guy he worked with sold him an old acoustic guitar. Your father never played, but loved music. By Christmas he'd written enough material for an entire record. And Rob, these weren't just songs, they were wonderful songs. Awful and terrible and macabre, but touching and poignant. He formed a band, mostly just some guys that could barely keep up with him, but before I knew it, he was famous. One day, I heard him on the radio and I never saw him again. Not until *that* night."

A million things flowed together. He and his father both suffered similar accidents and both developed an almost superhuman ability to create. His mother was from Texas, and had no family in Mississippi. But Gary did. A lot made sense, but even more didn't.

The song, the one his mother just played. He was almost sure he'd never heard it before but the words were so familiar it frightened him. He did the only thing he knew to do. He moved from the desk to the globe. He opened three fasteners and raised the top of the sphere. Crystal decanters filled with various liquids and empty glasses lay within. He poured three fingers of Jack green label and drank it down, refilled it and again, drank it down.

When he looked up, his mother had pulled out another item from her bag. It was a cheaply framed photograph. From his vantage point, Rob only saw that it was a headshot of a man. In color, but badly faded. The picture and frame measured no more than five by seven. He could tell nothing else.

"This is a picture of your father. He left—"

"Get out," Rob said. The whisky burned his gut, but he needed another swallow. "Take your things and go."

"You can't be serious, Rob. I'm your mother."

"Are you? And yes, I am serious. You can leave or I'll call the police and have them remove you." He allowed the tumbler to fall from his grasp and thud onto a colorful Chinese rug. He turned and walked out.

~ \* ~

Kathy Caulder watched her son leave the room. It could have gone better, much better. But it could have been much worse as well. She took a deep breath and stood. The bag in one hand, the photograph in the other.

There was no question whether she would leave or not. Rob was too much like Johnny. Stubborn and closed-minded. When he shut out the truth, it stayed shut out.

Hot, burning tears stung her cheeks. Life had never been easy, but she had survived. She'd agonized through an abusive childhood. Then, there was Johnny's leaving and ultimate death, with ten years thrown in between. Ten long, wasted years. Then, the pregnancy, meeting Gary, and raising Robert.

It was all for naught. Her son was following his father's footsteps and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Resigned, she stepped to the desk, placed the framed picture, face up, on its dark wooden surface, and left.

As she started the van out in the drive, she wondered if she would ever see Robert again.

She seriously doubted it.

Not alive, anyway.

~ \* ~

He watched the van idle down the drive from a window on the third floor. The Jack Daniels had his head swimming, not an altogether bad thing. He knew even in this state, that he'd reacted poorly. After all, Kathy Caulder was his mother. No amount of wishing or forgetting the past would change that. Nor would any amount of lies she'd ever told him.

"Mr. C.? Is there anything that I can do for you?" It was Tabby. Her office was located on this floor, accessible either from within the house or a separate entrance at the top of a stone stairwell. Besides her efficiency, she was also discreet, quiet, and knew just when he needed her. She was, perhaps, the only person alive that he didn't possess a feeling of scorn, suspicion, or outright dislike for. She was only about five feet seven inches tall, with prematurely graying, chestnut hair. Her face, though a bit fleshy, was pretty, and her eyes remarkably bright and insightful.

"No, I'm fine," he said, continuing to look out the

window. Without a word, Tabby turned to reenter her office. "One sec," he said. He faced her. "Tell Kevin I need some company." Kevin Murphy was more or less a glorified gopher and do-boy for Rob. He took care of supplying Rob's prescription medications as well as harder substances, "party favors" they were called. Kevin also was well-connected with the L.A. club scene and could track down almost any type of woman his boss was in the mood for. "Tell him...I'm thinking Rose McGowan." Tabby nodded and disappeared into her work area.

That was another thing about his assistant. She could think Rob was the scum of the earth, but would follow each and every directive without fail or fault.

Rob remained at the window seconds longer, then went to a washroom. He flipped the light on, turned on the sink, and splashed cold water on his face.

The reflection in the mirror bothered him. Not that his reflected image wasn't expected, but rather the opposite. The years of hard living weren't catching up to him, they already *had*. His once handsome face was droopy, even chubby. His eyes were bloodshot, and there were scatterings of gray in his hair. His gut reached out over the waistband of his pants, a bit more than barely.

"Real superstar material," he muttered and flipped off the light on his way out.

## ***Nineteen***

Three weeks after Kathy Caulder drove out his life, Robert awoke in a motel room on Sunset Strip, alone and naked. The room stank of sweat and sex and stale beer.

He tried to remember the names of the three girls, but so much of last night was a blur. Recalling names that he probably hadn't even heard in the first place was damn near impossible.

He sat up in bed, twisted, and dropped his feet to the floor. The heel of his right foot crashed down on something wet and cold. Rob looked down to see a partially-filled discarded condom and proceeded to wipe his bare foot on the carpet. His clothing was strewn across the darkened room and took him several minutes to collect.

Without showering, Rob slipped on his boxers, shirt, and pants, then worked his feet into shoes. The sunlight sliced into his eyes when he cracked open the door. Using his hand to shield his them, Rob did his best to ascertain his bearings.

He located his car and was stepping in that direction when he saw movement in the corner of his eye. Too slow to react, Rob felt impact on his shoulder. He was knocked to the ground before he could draw a breath. He writhed around, his back to the parking lot, trying to locate his attacker.

*Attackers* was a better word.

Three distinct figures were silhouetted against the blaring sun, all definition and features concealed. Rob backpedaled using his hands and feet but wasn't quick enough to avoid a boot toe to his ribcage. The air was

sucked from his lungs and the first seeds of fear took root.

Even without air, Rob rolled, over and over, away from his attackers. With his change of position he was able to see all three. Garden variety thugs. Muggers. All three were white with hair down past their shoulders. All three sported tee shirts with holes either cut or chewed through them. The man in the middle, or kid for none looked older than twenty-one, was the apparent leader. He held a long length of pipe. He started toward Rob.

Rob splayed his hands upwards. "Please," he said, "don't."

"Your wallet. Throw it to me." A simple mugging, that's all this boiled down to. Theft. Rob had a brief moment to realize these youngsters had the audacity to assault him in broad daylight. He wondered why someone didn't come to his aid, or at least call the cops. But all those thoughts flashed away when he reached into his pocket for his billfold.

His pocket was empty. Empty. He fully remembered placing it in the rear right pocket of his slacks last night while dressing for a night on the town.

One of those damned bitches, he realized. He'd been sucked and fucked and fucked again, right out of not only his money and coke but his wallet with credit cards, debit cards, driver's license, and other important documentation.

"I-I don't have one," he heard himself say.

"Gee, fellas. Guy says he doesn't have a wallet. What do you two think?"

The guy to his right, a mousy looking kid with a greasy face and greasier hair, said, "Look at his clothes. Fucking shirt alone probably cost a few hundred. If he ain't got no wallet, I'm sure he's got a clip. Probably packed with C-notes."

"No, no," Rob protested. "I was robbed."

The guy in the middle laughed. "Robbed? Now who has such bad luck to get robbed twice in the same day?"

"Let's fuck him up, Tim." This from the guy on the left.

"Yeah. Give him a lesson on honesty."

"Didn't your momma ever teach you that honesty is the best policy?" This came from the leader. Rob saw by the sadistic look on his face that something was about to happen. Something not very good for him. And he was right.

The pipe crashed down on Rob's forehead. He heard his skull crack open and a pain like a raging inferno engulfed him. Two blows later, he drifted away into twinkling stars, grateful to escape the agony.

~ \* ~

Rob awoke later. How much later he didn't know. The sun was still brilliant in the sky and the day was no longer warm, but hot, almost sweltering like summers in Mississippi. When he was able to pry his lids apart, he saw what had awakened him.

A dark-skinned Indian was shaking him by the arm. An older man with a jet black mustache.

"Sir," the Indian was saying. "Sir? Are you okay? Do you need an ambulance?"

Rob tried to sit up but didn't get very far. An atomic bomb burst inside his skull before he was halfway up. Cringing, he laid back onto the heated concrete.

Mentally, Rob took a survey of his condition. Every part of him screamed. From the tip of his toes to the top of his head, he hurt. Not ached, not tickled, but hurt. Really, really bad.

With the man's help, Rob was able to get to his feet, but only barely. Though it didn't surprise him that his car, his Porsche 911, was gone, it still pissed him off. As it turned out, the man was the day manager of the motel and was just now coming to work. He aided Rob in getting into a chair and tried to convince Rob to let him call an ambulance. Rob begged off, instead asking for the telephone.

When the man brought him a cordless, he dialed Tabby and briefly told his location. Then, he was out for a long, long time.

~ \* ~

Rob was treated at home by a very good, but very expensive, private physician. It didn't go well. Rob refused X-rays and any attempts to make him leave the house. The doctor did what he could, which included powerful painkillers.

After the doctor left, Rob asked for his laptop. He had a nagging feeling that something was wrong.

It was. And it didn't take long to find out.

Tabby brought him a HP laptop and left the room at his order. He flipped open the notebook computer and

powered it up. He waited as the Windows theme chimed on and off. With the finger pad he clicked the Word icon. The word processor opened to a blank document. The cursor flashed on a backdrop of pure, perfect white, bordered by slate gray.

And nothing else happened.

He placed his fingers over the keys. They hovered. And hovered. And hovered.

It took such a long time that he had to actually tell his fingers what he wanted to type. Even then it took an incredible conscious effort for him to type one simple phrase, not even a complete sentence:

*The Big Empty*

That was it. The waterfall was gone, the wondrous miracle that brought him wealth, power, fame, and influence was gone, run dry.

Would it return when he healed? Had he taken such a bang on the head that his brain just wasn't operating correctly? Would "ghost writing" return once the swelling went down?

He knew the answers to those questions before he even had time to examine them closely.

No.

He slammed the top down on the computer. He gripped it firmly and chucked it against the wall. The plastic housing erupted, electronic components showering down. He bit his lip hard; blood began to bead in small droplets. The hot liquid tasted salty, even tangy.

A knock on the head had brought his gift. Another had taken it away.

Easy come, easy go.

But already, in just minutes, Rob saw his life begin to crumble before his eyes.

No more books, no more movies, no more video games, no more music. All those no's added up to no more big, fancy house, no more women, no more drugs, no more superstar lifestyle.

Robert Caulder swallowed hard.

Automatically, his mind went into survival mode. With the speed of light, he considered his options.

He had seven books left unpublished. Seven



manuscripts sitting in wait.

He was currently getting eight million from Bennet per book. Another two bestsellers and he would demand ten. Maybe by the time the seventh was contracted he would be able to get fifteen. Say three to four million in film rights (the last Caulder picture had grossed upwards of two hundred fifty million and that was fluid because DVD sales continued to expand the figure). Given some savvy marketing on his part, he was far from broke. Additionally, his stock portfolio was performing superbly.

Quick mathematics in his head.

He might just break the hundred million mark before he was out of books.

So he wasn't destitute.

But would one hundred million be enough?

That question in itself made him realize how far he'd come from making ten bucks an hour as a security guard. How could a hundred million not be enough? For anyone? That was a helluva lot of zeros. A helluva lot.

But money wasn't what he was worried about. Just moments ago, he was sure that it was his only, or at least main, worry. But now, he knew it was not.

What bothered him more than that was he would no longer be able to write.

Not one single book more than the seven he had in reserve would be written with his name in the byline. Not a single one.

The "ghost writing" was miraculous, a sheer jolt of excitement, but he'd learned little from the experience. He had no idea how to structure a successful narrative or shade compelling characters or deliver emotion through his own words.

Sure, he could study what he'd written, but that would be little different than studying Shakespeare or Hemingway in an attempt to mimic their work. In short, such a tactic was doomed to fail, an exercise in futility.

Rob's mouth went dry and sweat formed on his brow.

He reached to the side of the bed. The good doctor had seen fit to supply his patient with an incredibly potent painkiller: morphine, high grade. Rob's system had not digested such a strong substance since his accident several

years ago.

It took the fewest of minutes for Rob to feel the effects. And when the blanket of warmth and euphoria covered him there was no turning back...and he liked it that way.

~ \* ~

Rob awoke to a dark room, his body covered in a thin sheen of sweat. The dreams had been so vivid, so real. No, not dreams, nightmares. His mouth was dry but he tipped over the bottle of water when he reached for it on the nightstand. The morphine had slowed his reflexes to the point where he was unable to retrieve the bottle before its contents wasted.

Cursing to himself, he hauled himself out of bed.

The discarded laptop still lay in a heap on the floor. Slowly, he reached down for it, the muscles and tendons in his back and legs stiff. Still weakened by sleep, it took both hands to lift the small, compact computer. It was busted and busted good.

He was moving to place the laptop on a small table when the eruption came. Stinging and brash, his vision filled with colors all over the spectrum. Violent yellows, atrocious oranges, fiery reds. It felt like an atomic bomb had been detonated within his thin, fragile cranium.

Through the colors, shades, and hues, the room to began to revolve around him. It was if he were strapped to a terrible carousel.

His heartbeat thrummed inside his skull with the force of a jet engine, each and every thump excruciating beyond articulation.

A sound escaped his lips, but he felt it more than heard it. For there was no hearing anything beyond the assault inside him. Rob felt, or imagined he felt, the firing of millions of synapses, of each and every nerve tingle.

It was awful. It was terrible. It was crippling.

Robert Caulder went down. But slowly, not quickly. His knees bent and he dropped to the floor in a crazy slow-mo fashion.

He writhed on the floor.

He reached out, his fingernails scraping against the wood floor, searching for something, anything to relieve this

torment.

His mouth opened and bile rose in his throat, torching the tissue as if it were pure acid.

His arms and legs trembled, then his body was encompassed in a massive seizure.

Skittering on the edge of unconsciousness, the colors in his vision faded to washed-out versions of their former selves.

Then a star field lay before him. Pinpricks of tiny white, red, and yellow.

Then...

Then it was all gone. All of it. The room swam back into focus and for the slightest of moments Rob thought he'd gone deaf from the lack of thundering sound.

He lay, exhausted. Seconds passed, minutes went by.

The labored, rapid breathing slowed. Eventually, Rob's system returned to normal, or a close proximity to it.

After a long while he stood and made his way deliberately to the master bath. He turned the sink faucet on and waited for the coldest water possible to pour forth.

He drank three large gulps, using his cupped hands.

He straightened up and looked at his reflection.

Tears streamed down his cheeks.

But not ordinary tears.

These tears were not warm, clear, and salty. But crimson, the color of...of blood.

The tears smeared hateful and red down the flesh of his face. Small, dark pools of the foul liquid gathered in his eyes.

Rob swallowed hard, his throat tight. Instinctively, he wiped the tears with his hands, with his fingers. With the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he swirled the substance. As the thin film of fluid began to dry, it became sticky.

If this wasn't blood, it was a damn good imitation.

The water still ran from the faucet. Rob plunged his head up under it, rinsing not only the back of his head, but working the water over his face as well. He saw the blood mix with the water and swirl down the porcelain sink. After a while the pinkish water became clear and he raised his head from the sink.

The sight in the mirror was chilling.

He jumped back, twisting his ankle as he did so. His scream tore itself from his lips and rang through the air. The shrillest sound he'd ever made.

A dog or beast or whatever it was snarled from the reflective glass. A horrible sight, it was a huge, muscled creature with no hair or fur but rows upon rows of yellowed, dagger-like teeth. Its eyes glowed in a strange, otherworldly yellow.

Before Rob could get to his feet, the creature had worked its head and shoulders through the mirror. The claws on its forelegs were black and appeared supernaturally sharp. The sink cabinet groaned under the new strain.

Rob considered the possibility that this might all be a hallucination brought on by the morphine.

The beast growled, thick saliva dripping from the jagged teeth.

Fuck that. Hallucination or not.

Using the balls of his feet for leverage, Rob launched himself through the open door just as the behemoth pounced down on to the floor, its entire body now having emerged from the mirror.

Rob just barely slammed the door when the creature crashed into it with the total of its considerable weight. The door was heavy, made of solid wood, but it groaned at the force, the hinges squealing in protest.

He had a choice to make: either to remain with his body pushed against the door until the beast broke through, or make a run for it. Neither option afforded a very fair chance of survival.

*The hell with it*, he thought. Like a sprinter, Rob got into a position of maximum takeoff and shot toward the door of the bedroom. Slamming the door loudly behind him, he was on the stairs and heading down in a flash.

Rob briefly noticed the stares from his staff as he pounded down toward the first floor. But he didn't care. Let the damn demon dog have them if they were too stupid to realize their lives were in jeopardy.

Rob ran, never slowing until he was through the foyer, out the front door, and safely outside, several yards away from the entranceway.

He was breathing hard, his lungs begging for air.  
It was time to get the hell out of Dodge.

~ \* ~

Tabby was at her desk when she'd first heard the commotion. Being in the employ of Robert Caulder for these past several years had well acquainted her with the strange and extraordinary sounds that one might expect from a super-wealthy bachelor. But these noises didn't sound like the throes of ecstasy she was accustomed to. Nor did they sound like her boss throwing one of his famous temper tantrums, though, in all honesty, such tantrums were becoming more and more frequent, and more and more violent.

Before she could rise from her padded leather chair, she heard a large crash, followed by a louder crash. She made it to the doorway in time to see Rob running pell-mell down the corridor. She could've been mistaken, but she thought she saw fear on his face. Complete, unbridled fear.

But that wasn't all.

A rumbling and clattering came from his bedroom. Then, a strange inhuman noise, a growling or almost a mewling. Her breath caught her throat. The disturbance seemed almost animalistic in origin. Suddenly, Tabby wasn't in such a hurry to leave her office.

Instead, she shut her door and locked it.

"What is it this time, boss?" she whispered. But she wasn't quite curious enough to investigate.

Tabby stood there waiting for the house to grow silent again.

Soon, it did.

## ***Twenty***

The sun was low on the western horizon. What had been a huge ball of pristine gold was now a sphere of burning orange. The wind, which was usually blowing incessantly this close to shore, was still. All in all, it was a beautiful evening.

But that didn't matter a hill of beans to Robert Caulder. Rob's hands were tight around the steering wheel of the Ferrari F430 Berlinetta F1. He tried to put the events of the last few hours out of his mind, but that proved difficult indeed.

From the front lawn, Rob compiled a list of things for Garvin to pack: clothing, PDA, cell phone, passport, and cash. While Garvin did as instructed, several of the other household staff came out to question what had happened in Rob's bathroom and bedroom.

Apparently, the beast-dog-demon-thing left evidence of its presence. It satisfied Rob that it hadn't been a hallucination. Fortunately, he was paying the salaries of those surrounding him. That allowed him to tell them to go back to work after assuring them that he was fine.

The only person who failed to put in an appearance was his assistant, Tabby. This bothered him more than it really should have. While Rob never had the slightest inclination of anything more than a platonic relationship with Tabby—well, perhaps that wasn't entirely true, there had been a time when every woman even close to being attractive caused lustful feelings to erupt in Rob—theirs had always been professional but close. Time and time again, he was reminded of what kind of mess his affairs would be in if

not for that woman's diligence and iron work ethic.

That she hadn't appeared out here during the entire time troubled him. Deeply.

But he gave it no more thought as Garvin hauled suitcases and bags out to the Ferrari. Finally, when Rob's entire list had been packed and stowed, he turned to Garvin.

"Look, I know that I'm leaving here with questions unanswered, but I am of the mind that doing so is in everyone's best interest."

"How long should I expect your leave, sir?"

Rob thought about that. At the moment, he had no planned destination, so the duration of his leave was completely unknown. "I'm...I'm not sure, Garvin. But I'll be in touch, don't worry about that. I've got a few things to work out. And while Mrs. Wagner is in charge of my business endeavors, I'll expect you to handle any and all issues that arise concerning the estate and property in my absence," he said. He always referred to Tabby as Mrs. Wagner in the presence of the help, even Garvin, when he chose formality. It helped instill a sense of hierarchy at the residence, a clear chain of command.

"Yes, sir," Garvin said as if the responsibility both thrilled and challenged him. He was, Rob considered, a very good man.

Rob climbed into the car, started the engine, and gave one final look at his palatial home. The drapes in Tabby's office were pulled to one side; he could barely make out a portion of her face through the window. He smiled and gave a simple but crisp salute, then he fired down the drive, the drawbridge lowering just as he approached.

He drove.

~ \* ~

The hum of the tires was lost to the Pioneer speakers. Amber August's, "Feel the Dark" drowned out every sound. Since the revelation that Johnny Krueger was his biological father, Rob had acquired almost every known recording of the band. He couldn't believe he'd missed these songs.

Dark and troubling, most were works of pure genius, at least in his mind. While there was some filler, most could more than likely land on the top spot of any present-day chart. This song in particular, seemed to fit his current mood

very well.

*In the black of night...  
Fears unnamed, take flight.  
Forever will I dwell...  
In my own awful hell.  
Give me a sign,  
In very little time,  
That all will be well.  
Feel the dark,  
Feel the dark.  
Pierce your heart.  
Feel my pain,  
Falling like summer rain.  
Feel the dark,  
Feel the dark.  
Take me away,  
Hide my soul, I pray.  
Light is gone, terror reborn...*

The song was slow, ballad-like, and Rob found himself singing along with Johnny, with his father. While the vocals were undoubtedly the most powerful component, the musicians were in no way slouches. It was beautiful and sad. It made Rob feel like he was not alone in his fear.

His fear of being finished as a writer.

His fear that reality was crumbling away and his sanity was suspended by nothing more than a silken thread.

The engine of the Ferrari roared and the car shot forward on the road. Surprised and astonished, Rob grabbed the wheel even tighter. Instinctively, he pulled his foot from the accelerator, but the car did not lose velocity.

He watched as the speedometer raised over eighty...eighty-five...ninety.

Rob tapped the brake, gingerly, as if it were made of thin glass. At this high speed, slamming on the brakes would be nothing short of suicidal.

The taps had no effect. He pressed the pedal harder. And harder still.

The needle continued to climb.

Over a hundred now.

Rob tried to swallow, but couldn't.



The seascape to his right flashed by. The landscape on his left was nothing but a blur over darkening green.

The lines in the center of Pacific Coast Highway were no longer broken but appeared to be a single, uniform line.

His palms grew moist and the leather-wrapped steering wheel began to slip in his grasp.

*Fuck!* He thought. He was going to die! He was either going to careen off into the ocean, crash into the steep incline on the opposite side, or ram into a fellow motorist.

Then things got worse. Much worse.

Though twilight was only beginning to fall, the large RV directly in front of Rob's rocketing Ferrari already had its taillights lit. And good thing. The color of the recreational vehicle was a light tan, making it blend in completely with the darkening evening.

The distance shrank at an incredible clip.

The huge bulk of the vehicle's rear grew exponentially in the Ferrari's windshield. Each second that passed brought doom closer and closer. At this speed, the sports car would plow into the bigger vehicle. In a screech of twisting and crashing metal and fiberglass, the RV, if not knocked off the roadway down the huge cliff and into the outcropping of jagged rocks below, might survive. Rob in his speeding bullet, however, would not be so lucky.

Rob nudged the Ferrari to the left and out into the oncoming lane. He was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when he noticed approaching headlights. In the distance the headlamps appeared as nothing more than dim eyes cut into the deepening velvet of a clear seaside evening.

But at this speed, quickly passing the RV and leaving it safely behind was done in mere seconds. That still left the advancing vehicle racing toward him. Reassuring himself that the RV was well behind him, Rob nudged the steering wheel, slightly. The speedometer was past one hundred twenty miles per hour.

The car did not swerve to the right in the least. The steering wheel refused to move. With a bit more pressure, Rob tried again.

Nothing.

The looming vehicle, a delivery van, Rob could now make out, was within five hundred yards, the straight

highway making it impossible to miss.

Panic seeped into Rob's mind. Sharp and cutting, it swelled within him like a burning infection.

In the background, Johnny Krueger sang about death on the open road. *How appropriate*, Rob thought.

Rob pulled on the steering wheel with all his might, the muscles in his forearms and shoulders bulging. He felt as if he might yank the column from its binding, but still the wheel did not turn.

The van was now blinking its headlights. No doubt in an effort to advise the apparently crazed driver zooming toward it of its presence. The effort was futile.

Rob released the wheel. Instead of a loss of control and a wild swerving that should happen at one hundred twenty, bump that, one hundred and thirty-five miles per hour, the steering wheel stayed straight and true—an invisible hand guiding it like a missile to a pre-selected target.

He even considered jumping from the vehicle. Of course, such an act would be completely suicidal. But maybe if he freed himself from the Ferrari, whatever force was in control would abandon the car, saving the life of the van driver. He had no idea how that made sense.

But very little of what he'd witnessed over the last several hours made any sense to him at all. How did Satan's own pooch materialize through a pane of glass and chase him from his bedroom? How did a top-of-the-line, state-of-the-art, Italian sports car develop a mind of its own? Okay, so he could buy the accelerator sticking and the brakes suddenly not operating correctly, but the steering system, as well?

No fucking way.

Even if he had been able to sacrifice himself for another, someone he didn't even know, he never got the chance. Just as this strange poltergeist had taken over other parts of the car, it had taken over the door and window locks as well. He couldn't open either door or window. He was trapped within this quarter-million dollar car just like a sardine in its tin deathbed.

He was getting so close to the van that he could now make out slight features of the driver's face and upper torso,

though he couldn't make out details like hair color or age. The man's eyes were wide and his mouth agape in a wide "O".

*I know just how you feel, fella.*

Fifty yards.

One hundred fifty miles per hour.

Thirty-five yards.

One hundred sixty-seven miles per hour.

Twenty yards.

The front of the car hovered slightly as if the speed was so great that the big car was trying to take flight. It was an otherworldly feeling. But with the panic and anxiety already brewing like a Texas twister inside him, that one single detail did little to add to the overall effect of disaster that overtook him.

His own headlamps flared onto the chrome bumper of the Chevy van, blinding in intensity. He was mere seconds from death.

Then the driver of the Chevy made his move.

In a daring maneuver worthy of the best of racecar stardom, the van swung around Rob, passing in a white blur safely to his side, and then jumped back into its lane. The road ahead was empty again.

No horn.

No twisting metal.

No crack of fiberglass.

The Ferrari slowed. Within moments, it was traveling at under one hundred and twenty-five miles per hour. The steering wheel wobbled and the car veered to the left, but only barely. The car had one hell of a wheel alignment; Rob had to give it that.

When the realization hit him that the car was now back under his control, Rob applied the brake and pulled to the shoulder of the road. He killed the engine and pushed open the door. Only then did he allow himself a ragged breath of relief.

He sat silent and still for an indeterminate amount of time, his heartbeat calming and the sweat on his brow beginning to chill as the cool sea air blew into the interior of the car.

The RV passed. He envied the driver's ignorance of

just how close he'd come to dying.

Rob pulled himself out of the seat, feeling like an arthritic geriatric, bones cracking and popping, and muscle and tendons sore and hot. It felt good to be standing again. For long moments he'd thought he'd never again have the chance. He planted his feet soundly and took strong steps away from the car. His loafers made slap-slap sounds on the road's surface. There was not another car coming for miles in either direction. Night had finally fallen and headlights would be easy to spot.

Even in his weary state, confusion nibbled at his mind. Too many unexplainable things had occurred in much too short a time for his mind to come to grips with any of them.

He walked across the road, stopping at the guardrail. The steel barrier was secure when he placed his hands on it, but Rob knew differently. If he'd sped into it at the rate he'd been traveling, he would've launched over the cliff like the coyote in the Looney Tunes cartoons, only to crash into the roiling sea that smashed against the rocks far below, as sharp and terrible as the teeth of a monster.

In the darkness, the sea was lost to him. Clouds rolled in and the moon and stars lay hidden behind a veil of black cloth. The salty sea spray, even at this altitude, stuck thickly to his face, his lips.

He had not been harmed.

That thought assailed him like a...well, like a thief in the night.

He considered the facts. A bump on the head unleashed in him the ability to write compelling, and, ultimately, commercially successful stories. Stories about very bad things. Another bump on the head apparently brought those things to life.

At least that part was simple. Perhaps strange and crazy, but simple.

He had never written about a demon hound or an out-of-control car. He was sure of that. If he had, if the horror stories he'd committed to paper had somehow become reality, at least he would have some idea of what to expect next. If whatever was playing with him was only taking the plots from his novels and inserting him as the main character, then at least he would be able to prepare in some

way.

But apparently, the gods of fate were not that kind.

These abominations, the hound and the Ferrari, were completely new.

More than likely, whatever came next would also be a new, foreign experience.

And that, in a nutshell, was exactly the point. Something *would* come next. He still lived.

Surely the devil's lapdog could have made short work of him. The Ferrari could have easily veered through the guardrail and ended in a fiery crash.

But that hadn't happened.

He had survived, but not by his ability or skill. Someone, or something, had been merciful to him.

He'd been terrified. Close to shitting his pants.

Had that been the point?

To scare him?

Somehow, Rob thought that was exactly the point.

This...thing...was playing with him. Teasing him. Trying to crack him.

Well, the hell with that.

Robert Caulder was not such a coward, after all.

Then another realization hit him. If he wasn't worried about his own life, not fearful of what may await him next, then what *would* scare him? He thought about that only a few minutes. Then, he knew. Knew all too well.

## ***Twenty One***

Ellen watched as Jeremy's chest rose and fell. On the television, CNN reporters discussed the rising price of gasoline and how, in retrospect, the American people had grumbled about every cent, but continued to buy the fuel like it was going out of style.

Jeremy had been asleep for the better part of thirty minutes, she guessed. She'd helped Tori get ready for bed, brush her teeth and tucked her in. Working six days a week, almost ten hours a day, was wearing her husband down.

Jeremy Edwards was an investment banker, and a good one. He owned his own office downtown and as far as independents went, he was very, very successful. But he refused to slow down. During their many talks, which were one of the greatest joys of their relationship, at least in Ellen's mind, he'd told her that he would slack off when she was living the kind of life he believed she deserved.

Such a notion was silly, and she told him as much. Still, there was no changing his mind.

Ellen opened her shop almost three years ago. It took almost eighteen months to show any profit, but now, while she wasn't making a million bucks a year from selling floral arrangements and fresh bouquets, she was doing well. Well enough to keep doing it. She considered quitting or at least hiring more help. Tori would start school in the fall and she should be spending as much time as possible with the child. But, truthfully, Tori enjoyed the flower shop almost as much as her mother. And who knew, in twenty years or so, Ellen might pass it on to her only child. The makings of a small family empire, so to speak.

A wonderful child, Tori was filled with both enthusiasm and wonder, and was in constant awe of the world around her. Much as Ellen had been ever since meeting, then marrying, Jeremy. The past couple of years had been especially grand.

Ellen crossed the living room and flipped off the TV. She bent down over Jeremy. The small cleft of his chin was adorable, and his baby face was so adorable, especially when he slept. She gingerly touched her lips to his. It didn't take very long to render a response from the dozing man.

"Did I fall asleep?" he asked, grogginess saturating his voice. Jeremy had been born and raised in upper Michigan, the second of three children. His northern accent had lessened since he'd moved south, but only just.

"Looks that way." Ellen began to move away, but Jeremy took her hand into his, softly, tenderly.

"I'm sorry I missed the show yesterday." Yesterday had been the Winchester County Annual Flower Extravaganza. Professional florists, amateur growers, and the general public had all gathered for a day filled with bright blossoms and exotic petals, lemonade and grilled hamburgers. Ellen's Rosebud Barn won a first-prize ribbon for an exotic specimen of orchid. Jeremy wanted to attend, but business kept him in Memphis until long into the night.

"Don't worry about it. Y'know, they have one every year."

"I thought maybe I could make it up to you."

"Yeah? How?"

Jeremy stretched back on the sofa, working out the joints that had stiffened during his short nap. Satisfied his body was free of kinks, he reached into his pocket and extracted a small, flat, velvet box. "Like this." He handed the box to his wife and waited, anxiously, as she opened it.

"Oh, darling. It's gorgeous." And it was. A pink sapphire encased in platinum suspended from a thin, delicate chain.

"I had a few hours to kill after lunch. When I saw it, I knew you had to have it."

"It's so pretty. But you shouldn't have."

"Sure I should've. Thought maybe you could model it for me. Y'know. Just the necklace." It was hard to miss his

mischievous grin.

He kissed her. As of late, their passion hadn't exactly cooled but had become something else. Instead of lust, they were in love. Affection was shown around the house, out in the open. But serious moves were reserved for the sanctity of the bedroom. At least until now.

Ellen absently placed the necklace and box on the sofa beside Jeremy's leg and allowed him to pull her closer. His strong but tender hands ran up and down the length of her back.

Before she knew it, she straddled him, her shirt thrown across the living room, somewhere.

Both husband and wife were so intent on their expression of love and adoration for one another, the whole world ceased to exist, save for them and this moment.

Oblivious to anything and everything, they made love.

Outside, down the road, stray dogs and wolves howled to the great, fat yellow moon. Then, suddenly, the night was quiet.

Too quiet.

~ \* ~

With the landing gear down, the wheels of the G4 touched down in a display of expert piloting. The nonstop flight from California had been smooth as silk. Captain Frank Laney, an accomplished flier, served as a Navy fighter pilot for the better part of twenty years. His distinguished career died, as most things do, with a whimper instead of bang. He'd reached the eligible retirement age still a relatively young man.

With a good income but boredom consuming him like a cancer, he'd had the completely unoriginal idea of opening a charter flight service, while he and his wife, Iris, enjoyed the good life. With a staff of five pilots and dozens more support staff, Frank catered to the upper crust of the Southern California populace. He offered lush jets with even more lush accommodations and charged top rates.

But his present passenger almost tripled the usual rate. Needing transportation immediately and willing to pay any price for it, Frank accepted the flight for the sole reason that no one else was available. The destination in Mississippi was near the absolute reach of the fuel load. Frank barely



had time to get his flight plan approved before he and his guest were in the air.

As he taxied per the tower's instructions, Frank was amazed at the size of the airport. Tiny wasn't even the word for it. Frank was further surprised that the tower was manned at this time of night. He'd landed in smaller places during his civilian career, but not many.

He brought the jet to a halt and went through a checklist. He mentally added one more scratch to his mental record of successful jumps through the air.

~ \* ~

Sitting comfortably in the rear of the G4, Robert Caulder wasn't thinking of the expert landing or how well the flight went. He wasn't even thinking of the small fortune he'd dished out to get here pronto. He tried to ignore the fact that he if he'd traveled commercially and rented an auto from the Memphis airport, he would have arrived just a couple hours later.

He glanced at his Rolex and did a quick mental calculation of the difference in time zones. Eleven thirty. Reasonably, he could roll into Ivy Springs by two thirty or so.

With the way things were going, hours, perhaps even minutes or seconds, could make all the difference in the world.

He grabbed his travel bag, growled a gruff word to the pilot, and was down on the tarmac within moments. He jogged to the rental car near a hangar. He opened the door, pulled the keys from above the visor, and started the car.

Rob peeled rubber from the tires before the jet pilot even exited the jet.

He reminded himself to give Tabby a raise if he made it through this.

It had been a long time since he'd navigated the roads of his hometown. But like he'd always heard: some things you just never forget.

A mist of rain was falling and Rob activated the Ford Mustang's wipers. His hands shook on the wheel. Fortunately, at least in a way, the shimmy was caused more from the coke he'd snorted on the flight than the memory of the hell-ride in the Ferrari barely twenty-four hours ago.

From the airport, Rob traveled at an acceptable speed,

but only because the darkness and the rain and the chance he might be intercepted by a state trooper or a local cop trying to make their ticket quota threatened his opportunity to arrive at his intended destination in a timely manner.

When Tabby text-messed the information he'd requested, he was surprised to find that Ellen had moved from her grandmother's house. But was he really all that surprised? If he hadn't at least considered the possibility, then why had he asked for the information in the first place?

Her name had changed as well. Ellen Caulder was no longer Ellen Caulder, but Ellen Edwards.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one who'd moved on.

But really, had he expected a woman like Ellen to not remarry? She was extremely attractive and a traditionalist at heart. Life wouldn't be complete without a partner to share it with.

He knew that because not so many years ago, Rob had felt the exact same way. But things had changed. *Really* changed.

Rob knew the new address, and it only took him a minute to mentally ascertain the best route. It was an address in town. While he couldn't visualize the house, he could the street. It would be a simple matter of finding the correct house number.

He cruised down the damp, dark lanes of the small town. Not much had changed. Some businesses had apparently gone bust, while a new breed had taken hold. Compared to New York and LA, Ivy Springs was dead, the streets rolling up long before now.

He turned onto the correct road, Cheshire, and slowed to take in the numbers attached to either yard signs or near the doorways of the homes. It seemed that Ellen had put the money he'd been sending her to good use. All the houses that lined either side of the well-maintained street were rather large, at least for this town, and exuded money. From closely manicured lawns to highly elaborate trimmings, the homes harkened back to another time.

Rob found the house. The mailbox read *Edwards*. It was an antebellum structure and he could see Ellen's touch as he pulled in the pea gravel drive. The landscaping was extraordinary. Far more complex and appealing than one

would expect from a commercial gardener.

He pulled the Mustang to a stop at the front of the porch.

Rob was distracted by the front door standing wide open, and the muddy tracks that led up the steps and into the house.

In the distance, sirens wailed.

~ \* ~

Tori Edwards was scared. Much more scared than ever in all her life. More scared, even, than when her daddy took her night light away. That had been a bad, bad night. The room had been so dark that it looked like it even had shades. There were grays and blacks and even darker blacks. But when morning finally came, the exhausted Tori realized there was nothing to fear about the dark. It was, as her daddy told her, just an absence of light.

But there was something to fear now. Something terrible and wicked, and cruel.

The screams woke her. The screams of her mom and dad. Though muffled, she knew the screams meant trouble. Serious trouble.

Like the brave girl that Mommy always said she was, Tori left her bed to investigate. She cracked open her bedroom door and slowly, carefully, crept to the stairs.

From where she perched at the head of the steps, she saw a horror that pierced her young heart. She couldn't see very far into the living room from her position, but she could see enough, perhaps too much.

At five years old, Tori Edwards didn't know a lot about the horrors of the world. But she knew enough to know that the two things wrestling with her mother and father weren't natural. Not just two robbers trying to make off with her mom's jewelry or her father's gun collection.

They looked like dead people. Dead people that had been dead for long time. While the television programming she was allowed to watch was closely monitored, she managed to break away from the cartoon channels and the Nickelodeon programs that her mother approved of, if she did so only half-heartedly. Tori remembered seeing the tail end of an especially gruesome movie where dead men rose from their graves.

While she didn't remember too much about the movie, but she remembered getting chills as the rotting arms and hands with nasty fingernails clawed up through the ground as if it were soft as sand. She'd kept that image in her head long after the movie ended. In fact, she had nightmares about those things. While it was no where near as scary as that first night without a night light, it was scary enough.

But it was no comparison to the scene that unfolded before her.

It looked as if the dead creatures—so much decay had set in that Tori couldn't tell the sex of either person—were winning the fight against her parents. Then, abruptly, the one holding her daddy twisted his neck at an impossible angle. Her father's eyes bulged and his tongue stuck out of his mouth. The dead thing allowed Jeremy Edward's body to fall roughly to the floor.

Then that dead thing joined the other in the fight against Tori's mother.

A scream threatened to let loose from the small child. But either she was blessed with intelligence far beyond her young age or an angel was looking out for her because she was able to remain silent. She thought of rushing to her mother's aid, but knew that would be a mistake. Tori made a decision. She knew, somehow, that if she escaped danger tonight, the decision would follow her for the rest of her life. She only hoped it was the right one.

She took care to turn from the carnage downstairs and willed herself to proceed slowly, not to run. It took all of her self-control not to bolt back to her room and bury herself beneath her bed or, better yet, deep within her closet.

Her plan of action was mature for a five-year-old, especially a five-year-old faced with such a situation. She bypassed her own room and made her way to her parents'. There was no phone extension in her room, but a phone rested on the nightstand on her mother's side of the bed.

On tiptoes, Tori pushed open the heavy door of the master bedroom. Then froze.

The room was pitch black. No light penetrated more than a foot past the doorway. The windows were covered in blinds and thick drapes. The darkness of the night outdoors would have been a welcomed reprieve from the almost

suffocating darkness of her parents' sleeping chamber.

A sound traveled from the living room, up the stairs, and down the hall to Tori's ears. It was the sound of her mother begging for her life. That was all the push Tori needed.

With her arms splayed before her, Tori took very small steps into the yawning murk. Within five paces she was at the bed. Using the foot of the bed to guide her way, she made the journey to the telephone in mere seconds.

Downstairs, her mother screamed. It chilled Tori's blood. It was high-pitched and intense, and somehow Tori knew it would be the last sound her mother would ever make.

Swallowing hard and fighting the panic and fear that threatened to consume her, Tori reached for the phone and picked it up. The illuminated keypad was blaring in the complete darkness, bathing her and her immediate surroundings in a strange orange glow.

She dialed 9-1-1.

"Nine-one-one emergency. How can I help you?" The operator was a woman, one that Tori considered to have a voice of an angel.

"Help," Tori whispered into the phone.

"What's that? Could you speak up, please?"

Tori realized that she had barely spoken aloud. But she didn't want to be loud enough to be heard by the monsters downstairs. If dead people could come back to life, did they have other superpowers? Like super hearing? But she would have to be loud enough for the operator to hear her.

"Help," she repeated, just slightly louder. "My mom and my dad are being attacked."

"Attacked? Is that what you said?"

"Yes. By...by dead things." Tori had, for the briefest of moments, considered lying. But in the end, the truth won out.

"Honey, can you give me your name and address?" the operator asked. If she was surprised by Tori's words, she didn't let on.

The little girl was just about to respond when she

heard someone, or something, mount the stairs and begin to ascend. "They...they're coming, please hurry."

Tori dropped the phone, without even considering replacing it on the hook, and fell to the ground. She squirmed beneath the bed, her heart shivering with fear.

With both her mom and dad gone, dead, it had to be the dead things coming for her.

She tried to stop them, but tears streamed from her eyes. Salty and warm, they clouded her eyes. Soon, even the light that bled into the doorway hazed over.

Involuntarily, Tori screamed as one of the dead things moved into the room. Its rotting ankles were the only things she could see.

~ \* ~

Rob was on the first step when he heard someone yelling from inside. Instantly, he was in motion. He bounded up the steps, across the porch, and through the open door.

The lights were down low inside the house. To his left was what looked like a darkened kitchen. To his right, the pale blue light of a television flickered. He moved right.

In addition to the television, a floor lamp was aglow in the far corner. The sight that met Robert chilled him to his marrow. A man lay on the floor less than two feet from the tip of his right foot. The man's head was turned oddly, both his eyes and tongue protruding obscenely from his skull. Rob didn't recognize the man.

But he did recognize the crumpled body of the woman halfway across the room.

It had been a very long time since he'd seen her, but just like the highways and byways of his hometown, the face of his ex-wife was impossible to forget.

Ellen's eyeballs had been plucked from the sockets, the empty chasms bloody and vacant. Even though he was sure of what he would find, Rob bent and felt for a pulse.

A scream shattered the stillness of the house. It was even louder than the battering of his heart, the rush of his breathing and the torrent of blood flowing wildly in his ears.

He looked toward the staircase. The sound was desperate and pained. Rob glanced at the two broken bodies before him and realized that it surely couldn't sound any other way.

Whether from a desperation born of bravery or foolishness, Rob sprinted for the stairs, taking them two and three at a time. Some of his humanity still remained. He bounded toward danger in defense of another. All the drugs, women, and material success had left just a bare sliver of his former self.

He was faced with several closed doors when he reached the top of the stairs. He looked swiftly from the left to the right of the hallway. The further back, the darker the corridor became. He saw a light switch and flipped it on. Whoever was in the house had to be deaf not to hear his heavy footfalls on the wooden steps, so being stealthy at this late time would be nothing but irrational.

He listened intently as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the ceiling light located midway down the hall. A hushed bashing came from the doorway at the far right. Like a man possessed, Rob battered into the room. The scene before him was so insane that it didn't register at first.

There were two...zombies, for lack of a better word, towering over a small, fragile-looking child, a young girl with pigtails sprouting from her hair.

"Hey," Rob shouted.

The two members of the undead turned and faced Rob, the child momentarily forgotten.

The matching faces were hideous. No matter how much the rest of the duos' bodies had deteriorated, their faces and mouths were quite well preserved. The flesh was a leathery brown and the optical orbs dissolved into smudges of ash, but their mouths were wide and yellowed teeth gleamed sickly in the poor light.

One took a step for Rob. He swung a wild haymaker toward the living skeleton, but missed. As his fist fell, his arm followed, then his upper body. The zombie did not pass up the chance. Rob felt a barrage of bone-hard blows knock into the back of his head. He dropped to the floor in pain. Hard kicks to his ribs quickly followed.

Amidst the attack, Rob was able to raise his head to look at the child he had intended to help. She was dressed in a pink nightgown, tears streaming down her sweet face. Then it struck him.

Knocked every single bit of oxygen from his lungs.

The zombie had not attacked his chest, nor punctured a lung.

It was the sight of the defenseless child that paralyzed him.

Her face, her very likeness, banged a gong deep within him.

She looked...just like him.

The charming, tender face was devoid of Rob's masculine features, as if God Himself had stripped away all the rough edges and replaced them with smooth curves, delicate fringes. The eyes, however, were impossible to miss. It was like looking deep into a mirror and suddenly he *knew*.

This small, frail child was his. A child he had fathered with Ellen but hadn't known about. A secret she'd hidden from him, and hidden well. Except, that wasn't completely true. It wasn't hard to hide something that wasn't searched for. He had barely given his wife—ex-wife—so much as a passing thought in years. Would it have mattered if she'd been pregnant when he left?

There was no way to know, of course. But he suspected that even the news that she was with child wouldn't have persuaded him to stay.

As a matter of fact, Rob had never wanted a child, neither son nor daughter.

Until now.

Just the sight of this little girl ignited fires in him, steeled his body, and brought strength from reserves he hadn't known existed.

He catapulted from the ground, away from the zombie wrecking his body. He blew past the dead thing, placing himself between the child, *his daughter*, and her assailant.

Suddenly, it was gone.

Her tiny body shuddered against him as he wrapped her in his arms. "It's okay," he managed, hoping he wasn't telling his baby girl his first lie.

He cradled her closer to him. He could feel the heat of her body and he raged like a madman within. He forced himself to his feet, knocking the molesting skeleton backward with his hip. He pivoted on his left foot and kicked off. The second zombie, the one that had been on him, grabbed him as he ran past. Caught by the shirt collar, Rob



and the girl were slung into a wall.

But Rob's grip on the girl held true, and he fell with his elbows extended, cushioning their fall.

In his periphery, he saw both desecrations coming and knew he could not counter their combined onslaught.

Sirens, loud and wild, were suddenly outside. In the driveway.

He kissed the girl tenderly on the forehead. And let her go.

He turned with both hands balled, ready to fight to the death, but nothing was there.

The zombies had vanished.

Rob quickly surveyed the room. No sign remained of the undead duo.

Doors slammed shut outside.

He looked down at the child and asked, "What's your name?"

"T-Tori," she responded weakly. She didn't look too banged up. The scars she would bear from tonight would be more psychological than physical. He wished he could help in some small way. But this was not the time. He would never be able to explain to the cops what occurred here. If he was thrown in prison, he would be able to help no one.

"That's a beautiful name," he said, then opened an exterior window and, just as the zombies had before him, vanished.

## ***Twenty Two***

Glenda reared back in her comfortable chair and looked out over New York City. Her office was large, almost as large as the boss's. Her furniture was expensive but not ostentatious, flashy but tasteful, just like her, she reasoned.

For as far back as she could remember, Glenda had held an undeniable affinity for Looney Tunes. While she dearly loved almost all of the eternal characters from Daffy Duck to Foghorn Leghorn, Bugs Bunny was, by far, her absolute favorite. At home, her husband Jeff mostly turned a blind eye to the plethora of cartoon character knick knacks she planted in almost every open space, though when Glenda purchased the Bugs Bunny comforter set for their bedroom, he finally put his foot down.

For the office, however, she recognized the need to present a professional appearance and a business-like motif. The screensaver on her PC was Tweety Bird and a ceramic mug with the scene of the Roadrunner eternally being chased by Wile E. Coyote served as a pen and pencil holder. Besides those frivolous odes to her childhood loves, only one other piece of Looney Tunes memorabilia graced a spacious office wall.

But the mere enormity more than made up for the sparseness of collectibles. On the wall to her left, matted and framed in an exceptionally beautiful wooden frame was a bright watercolor print of none other than the one and only Bugs Bunny. A bright orange carrot protruded from one hand. Underneath, in fine, flowing script was the immortal question, "What's up, Doc?"

Despite some clients considering such decorations silly, Glenda felt she deserved the option of decorating as she saw fit. It had been a long time coming, but she'd made a success of herself in her chosen profession. In hindsight, however, she had to admit she'd never seen it coming. She'd come to work for Danielle Greer just to pass the time. While the spending money was nice, she never saw a future in it.

At best, it kept her busy.

Her husband was a captain for the New York City Police Department, and while a wonderful, caring man, he devoted much of his life to his work. Glenda was a big supporter of her husband. Just as he was of her, now.

There were drawbacks to her rise in the ranks of the New York literary agency hierarchy. Most notable was that she and her husband hardly crossed paths throughout the week, and only managed several hours together each weekend.

But they were happy. Both were doing what they wanted and both were very good at their jobs.

The lack of a home life, however, had to be filled one way or another. Not of the carnal aspect, Glenda wouldn't cheat on her spouse for anything in the world. Sure, she might daydream about an actor or television star every now and again, but that was nowhere close to adultery.

Now, she craved closeness. Intimacy with other people. Thankfully, she found such connections with her coworkers. She and Danielle remained close even as the agency grew by leaps and bounds. And other staff took to Glenda as well. Danielle may be the boss that ruled the roost, but Glenda was considered to be the mother hen that saw to everyone's needs.

Even Danielle's.

This was why she found herself looking out over the smog-infested city, miles of scenery blocked by pollution and impurities.

Danielle Greer had never been what you'd call a happy-go-lucky gal. But as of late, her mood darkened steadily. The laugh lines around the corners of her mouth had changed, eroded by an almost constant frown. The root of the matter did not rest with the agency. While Danielle had much more at stake with the firm's operations than

anyone, such stress hardly even touched her. She was a wonderful agent and an outstanding administrator. She exacted loyalty from both her clients and employees.

No, what had stolen her friend's joy lay beyond the realm of professional endeavors. It was a big black lesion across her heart.

And that lesion's name was Robert Caulder.

While Glenda was not often in the habit of naming infirmities after actual human beings, Robert's designation as an open wound was quite accurate.

Yesterday morning's news was the last straw for Danielle.

While the occurrence in Ivy Springs held little more than local appeal, the fact that such a famous person as the writer/actor/musician/pop icon Robert Caulder was involved virtually guaranteed exposure.

It hit all the major papers and news stations. It was the talk of the Internet, and radio was having a field day with it as well. While Danielle had not been the one to broach the topic, Glenda was nearby when she'd heard the news and had a chance to gauge her reaction.

It was like a pin puncturing an air-filled balloon. No leisurely loss of pressure, but rather an instantaneous, split second deflation. By the time Danielle left the office around noon, she hadn't recovered.

Glenda immediately donned her Mother Hen cap but to no avail. Danielle refused to discuss the topic, only saying that she was long overdue for a vacation.

"Where are you going?" Glenda had asked.

"Thought I might see some open skies," Danielle answered.

If not for overseeing the travel itinerary Danielle's assistant prepared, her boss would be lost to her for the next two weeks. Glenda tried to think of something she could do to help, but finally resigned to having flowers and chocolates delivered tomorrow.

She was shutting down her computer when her phone rang.

"Hello." There was no need for formalities. It was already late in the day, actually past the end of normal business hours. Besides, the receptionist was still at her

station and had routed the call.

"Glenda?"

"Jeff, hi." The sound of her husband's voice never failed to lift her spirits, even after all these years and even when they didn't need lifting.

"Look, have you seen the news coverage on this Caulder character?"

"How could I not?"

"He was a client of yours?"

"Of Danielle's actually, but yes, the agency represented him. Why?"

"I'm just a little worried. The guy has apparently slipped off the deep end. I'm concerned that he might actually pay a visit to the office."

"Here?" Glenda nearly laughed. Nearly. Jeff had been a cop for a long time and he hadn't risen to his position by being stupid. Far from it. His gut instincts were usually dead on. "I don't see why."

"I'm not sure. Logically, there's not much of a chance of it." Jeff paused for a minute, thinking. "Is Danielle in? Could I speak to her?"

"As a matter of fact, she isn't. She took a few weeks off." Glenda didn't add that the reason for her leave was the same reason Jeff had called about.

"That's good. Where is she?"

"Out west."

"Anyone know where?"

"Besides me and her assistant, I don't think so."

"Good. Try to keep it that way."

"Okay. I'll do my best."

"And Glenda?"

"Yes, darling?"

"I'm on my cell, I'm almost there. Don't leave the office until I get to you."

"That's sweet, Jeff. But do you really think it's necessary?"

"Yeah," he said solemnly. "I do."

~ \* ~

Despite all the cash Rob had on him, it was still difficult to arrange transportation of any kind without identification.

Again, he thought of his daughter. *His* daughter.

There were millions of things swirling in his mind, but the young girl was foremost. How was it possible to have offspring and not even know it? Regardless of everything, it amazed him. A piece of him, a living and breathing extension of himself. He would live on even after his death. Perhaps not he, but his traits and genes, perhaps even hopes and dreams.

It boggled the mind.

But there would be time for that later.

Rob's next thought rested on the photograph he held firmly in his right hand. It was a small wallet-sized picture, but the sole person in it was unmistakable.

Danielle.

After fleeing Ellen's new home, or *former* home, he corrected himself, he roamed the dark streets and alleys of downtown Ivy Springs. He really didn't know what else to do. He considered turning himself in to law enforcement, but the thought of jail, a trial, and possible imprisonment pushed such an action far from his mind. What would he tell the investigating officers? Zombies had attacked, subdued, and murdered two adults, one of which happened to be his ex-wife, but spared his daughter? The whole thing stank of a true crime documentary; one in which Rob was not ready to play the leading role.

They would trace the rental car and within an hour, two at the most, and the authorities would have his complete itinerary. It wasn't safe to go to the cops and it sure wasn't prudent to try to get a hotel room using his driver's license or credit cards.

At least he had his wallet. If he followed habit, he would have removed it from his back pocket as he drove; the bulky thing seemed to give him a leg cramp when he was behind the wheel too long. Whether his nerves had him too preoccupied or some weird sort of premonition had occurred to his subliminal mind, the wallet had remained in his pants pocket.

While the credit cards and ID were next to useless, Rob kept a large amount of cash with him at all times. In addition to the stack of bills in his wallet, he also carried a money clip with several thousand more. It was a nice clip,

too. 24 karat gold and his initials etched across it. Common sense said that carrying such a large sum of cash was dangerous, even foolhardy, but Rob had lived too long without money to not remind himself of how wealthy he'd actually become.

The last few years taught him a lot. Much of that was useless to someone who would, most likely, become a fugitive of the law within hours. But one lesson he'd learned was that money was power.

And he would need all the power he could muster to reach Danielle.

As he made his way down a relatively clean alley, a gust of wind came from nowhere. On that breeze, trash and litter fluttered by. But one piece of refuse landed right at his feet. At first, Rob dismissed it as a grocery list or perhaps a discarded gas receipt. But something told him to pick it up.

He took a brief reprieve from his flight from justice to bend down and pluck the item from the damp ground. It was a picture, small and rectangular.

But even in the gloom of the alleyway, he could see the face clearly.

How a picture of his former agent had come to be in this backwater town, at this precise moment was beyond Rob's ability to reason.

The meaning, however, was not lost on him. Danielle was in danger. Whatever evil he had released into the world, the sinister force that reanimated corpses and sent them to kill, and the macabre power that breathed hateful life into his Ferrari, was now heading for Danielle.

It was a long way to New York from Mississippi. Even longer if you couldn't legally purchase a plane ticket or rent a car.

Rob's next step was not a trick he'd learned in New York or even Hollywood or LA. He traversed the town and actually managed to hitch a ride at this late hour out to old Route 17.

As he walked the long, ill-maintained gravel road that branched off the much better road, Rob's ears picked up night sounds from the woods that surrounded him on two sides. Out here, this wasn't just a few wooded lots of undeveloped land. This far from town, houses were seldom

less than a mile apart.

Jonathon Kemp's double wide trailer was, to the best of Rob's recollection, three miles from the next inhabited residence. Since Jonathon's way of making a living from home was anything but legal, this served him just fine.

Jonathon and Rob had been friends all through school. Both had been fairly popular, at least until high school. Those four years seemed to change everything for everyone. They'd drifted, but still spoke in passing.

Thinking back, it was a shame, but it couldn't be helped now.

Contrary to popular belief, all country folk who lived this far from civilization in mobile homes and didn't hold a day job were not manufacturers of methamphetamine or farmers of marijuana.

Jonathon did not grow weed.

He did not cook crystal meth.

He wrote code. Computer code.

From Trojans to worms to the occasional old-fashioned virus, Jonathon was a master of computer programming. But while many of his ilk unleashed such disastrous software to the detriment of the public, Jonathon fancied himself more like the ghost in the machine. An apparition that no one knew had even been there. And his skills were always available to the highest bidder. Since tenth grade, Jonathon had been able to hack into the financial markets, defense contractors, and credit bureaus, even download a free song now and again.

With his prowess with all things electronic, Jonathon wasn't a poor man. While he lived in a crumbling trailer house, he owned over one hundred acres of the surrounding land and had money hidden away at countless clandestine foreign banks.

Within the confines of Jonathon's aging Fleetwood, was all manner of sophisticated computer equipment, from the latest hardware to the most complex software. When Rob and Jonathon were in the second grade, Rob got a set of Mark Twain novels for Christmas. Jonathon, on the other hand, received a Tandy computer from the Radio Shack. Both had seemed to find their life's calling on that December morning.



Before Rob was a hundred feet from the trailer, lights as bright as suns flared to life. Unseen motion detectors, no doubt.

"Robert Caulder," a voice boomed, seemingly from every direction. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" It was Jonathon's voice, projected through randomly spaced speakers. Rob wasn't surprised that his friend from yesteryear had so easily identified him. After all, such ability was what had drawn him here in the first place.

Rob raised his voice to be heard. "I...uh...need a favor."

The laughter was instant. "A favor, you say? After what, fifteen years? By the way, I caught the police transmissions, you're a wanted man. If I allow you in, I'd be aiding and abetting a felon. Isn't that right? A famous felon to boot."

Rob's mouth grew dry. It never crossed his mind that Jonathon would fail to help.

"Well, Robbie boy? Any reason not to call 9-1-1, right now?"

Rob really only had one card to play. People are the same around the world. Regardless if they hail from the skyscraper world of New York City, the golden sunshine of the west coast or the pine forests of Mississippi.

"Yeah," Rob answered. "A real good reason. Money. And a lot of it."

"Well," the friend from the past said via concealed exterior speakers, "what the hell are you waiting for? Come on in."

~ \* ~

Though Rob had high expectations for the kind of assistance Jonathon could render, he left the crumbling mobile home amazed at what the computer hacker/fraud wizard accomplished in such a short period of time. Within three hours of entering the trailer, Rob was out the door, heading to the Tupelo airport for a flight to St Louis. From there he would board a nonstop flight to North Dakota.

Armed with new identification. Two clean credit cards issued in his new name, Joshua Lewiston. A secure cell phone with a scrambler, Internet capability, and media-enabled. A decent blond dye job on his dark hair, and blue

contact lenses.

Jonathon was like Q from the James Bond movies. Instead of a home, he had inside the trailer a computer rivaling any Rob had ever seen. Additionally, he had all the makings of a successful espionage mission. Makeups, hair dyes, secure phones, laptops, and dozens of credit cards that he could manipulate with a handful of key strokes. Jonathon instructed Rob not to use each credit card for more than a week, unless he wanted the credit card companies to launch an investigation and be hot on his heels quicker than any FBI agent.

Besides the clever disguises and toys, Rob also requested Danielle's location. How could he find her after so much time? Chances were he'd miss her at the office and spend hours tracking down her apartment. With her agency continuing to pull in big money he was fairly sure she'd moved to a bigger, better office, and probably a larger, more luxurious apartment as well.

He was right. She'd moved to a swankier address, but that wasn't all. Her credit card was showing hits in a small town in northern North Dakota. A quick check of airline manifests showed she'd arrived just a day earlier in Bismarck and leased a rental car. A quick search of statewide inns, hotels, and boarding houses—by a program that Jonathon developed and created himself—showed that she was renting a cabin just outside of the small town of Minot.

New York to North Dakota. Rob was very glad he'd checked. Without Jonathon he may have never found her. And even if he had, it would've been too late.

If it wasn't already.

Rob had no idea how his school friend became so skilled at such work, but he had to give it to the guy, it was easily worth the ten grand Rob had parted with.

Thank God for the credit cards; Rob was close to broke.

From Ivy Springs, Rob drove south to a waiting jet, and slept after takeoff until arriving in St. Louis. From there he caught a ride on a 747. As he drifted off to sleep, a very troubled sleep, he wondered if Danielle would be the last.

Or would he?

## ***TwentyThree***

The sky was wide and clear, serene.

Too bad her emotions didn't reflect her surroundings.

Danielle sipped at her wine. She wasn't a big drinker, but at the moment the drink tasted very fine. It was cool, bordering cold, out on the balcony of the two-story log cabin. She'd hoped the anxiety that had overtaken her when she'd learned of the murders, and Rob Caulder's participation, or possible participation, in them would be eased if she escaped the pressures of the office. For wasn't her invigorated agency a product of the man himself?

She'd told herself many, many times that she would have risen to the top if she'd never discovered Caulder. Or tried to. But facts were facts. He put her on the map, in a big way. Sure, she'd done the same for him. But the son of a bitch had talent, true natural talent, and if she hadn't signed him, someone else was bound to. Who knew, she might've gone bust and ended up as a cocktail waitress or a secretary for an insurance salesman.

But she hadn't. Wasn't that what mattered? The end result? She was wealthier than she had any right to be. She'd finally made her father proud. Though, when that came it hadn't been nearly as sweet as she'd dreamed it would be.

She couldn't get Robert Caulder out of her mind. The man was a fungus. One that grew and grew until you couldn't ignore it. A handsome, dashing fungus that had once been sweet, considerate, and even childlike in his innocence. But the world had changed that, hadn't it?

Or had it only unleashed what had always been there,

hiding in deep dark concealment? Waiting only for the opportunity to strike.

There was, of course, no way to tell. She hadn't spoken to the man in a long time. A very long time.

So why was he on her mind constantly?

It wasn't the murders. She'd dealt with his memory daily, like an affliction that would never heal. The murders only further corrupted an already blemished time in her life.

She loved him.

And she feared him.

Chances were he was a cold-blooded killer, but that wasn't the only reason she feared him. No, the fact that her heart belonged to him, almost since the time they'd first met, was the most fearful thing of all. If he walked through the door right now, at this moment, she would wrap him in her arms. She was sure of that. Time had a way of clearing judgment.

If she could go back, she would have been with him. Perhaps she could have saved him from the man he'd become.

A murderer.

It was still so hard to contemplate. He was a good man, deep down past the veneer he'd erected. Without all the money, fame, movies, books, and music, he was a good man.

At least he had been.

But this train of thought wasn't helping. She drained the last of the wine and walked back into the cabin, closing the sliding glass door behind her. The balcony opened from the master bedroom and she passed quickly through it. Downstairs, she made a fire and flipped on the television. In another time in her life, she would have opened a book. But reading was almost lost to her now. Only the TV provided the distraction that she needed.

By the time she was settled on the couch, another glass of wine in her hand, the sun had set and the long shadows now ruled.

Within the cabin, the darkness swirled. Coalesced into something more.

~ \* ~

North Dakota is a state in both the Midwestern and

Western regions of the United States of America. It is the northernmost of the Great Plains states.

During the 19th century, North Dakota was considered part of the Wild West. Formerly part of Dakota Territory, North Dakota became a state in 1889.

The Missouri River flows through the western part of the state and forms Lake Sakakawea behind the Garrison Dam. The western half of the state is hilly and is home to natural resources including lignite coal and crude oil. In the east, the Red River forms the Red River Valley, which holds rich farmland. Agriculture has long dominated the economy and culture of North Dakota.

The state capital is Bismarck and the largest city is Fargo. Large public universities are located in Grand Forks and Fargo. The United States Air Force operates bases at both Minot and Grand Forks.

From Bismarck, Minot was a few hundred miles north on Highway 83. Rob, or rather Joshua Lewiston, grabbed a mid-size sedan from Enterprise at the airport and he was on the road. A hot cup of coffee steamed in the cup holder and a few pills for stamina stashed in his pocket, were both purchased from a convenience store. Rob managed another nap on the 747 but his body was used to periodic chemical doses. While Jonathon, the ghost in the machine, had a virtually unlimited supply of espionage items, he had nothing stronger than ibuprofen.

Rob was a little jumpy and shaky as the Ford Avalon rocketed upstate. He could use a hit of something, but he made do with what he had: bad coffee and ephedrine tablets.

The sun was setting in the west as clouds began to blow in on top. As he was passing over Lake Sakakawea just past Underwood, rain, cold and frigid, began to fall. Huge drops buffeted the windshield. Apparently the rental agency hadn't changed the car's wipers in quite a while. The rubber streaked more than wiped away the water and, as the landscape darkened more and more by the minute, it became increasingly harder to see the road unfold ahead of him. He switched the headlamps back from bright to dim whenever the rain slackened enough for him to do so.

Even full of adrenaline, the drive became boring. To

compensate for this, Rob did something he rarely ever did. He switched on the radio and searched out the news, quickly finding a big network affiliate. It was either that, country and western, or gospel.

Rob followed the news since his departure from Ivy Springs. Usually not one to read his own press, well not that much anyway, he was drawn to the recounts of the murder. Although he had nothing to do with the deaths of his ex and her husband, the subterfuge the media employed had him actually doubting his own innocence, such was the mastery of their spin. As the only suspect, however, he knew full well the local law wouldn't pass up pinning it on him, if only to close the case that much faster.

But he could deal with that. There were two more points he had trouble with, though.

The final resting place of Steven and Phyllis Herbert, Ellen's parents, had been disturbed and in no small way. The graves had been dug up and the coffins emptied of their contents. This led Rob to the conclusion that the reanimated bodies of Steven and Phyllis Herbert killed both their daughter and her husband. This would have made perfect sense if they hadn't perished in a plane crash over Atlanta, Georgia. Only a scattering of remains were ever found. A much-delayed ceremony ensued and the pitiful remains were laid to rest. Apparently, these facts hadn't been lost to the reporter, either. Only he hadn't come to the same conclusion as Rob.

The reporter, a guy with the unremarkable name of Sam South, proposed that Robert Caulder, former media darling and drug-abusing former husband of the Herberts' daughter, had desecrated the remains in some selfish, macabre attempt to dishonor their memory.

Rob thought Sam South would make a much better novelist than newsman.

The second point of the news, which by wild coincidence, was being discussed on the radio at this very moment. Tori Grace Edwards was his daughter's name. And CNN established her to be the natural daughter of Robert Caulder and Ellen Edwards.

There was no doubt it was true. It took but one look to see she was his, but to have that knowledge confirmed by

the most popular news source in the world was another thing entirely.

Tori was five years old and had, to the best of the news agency's knowledge, been completely unaware that the man her mother was married to was not her biological father. Reports indicated she was under the care of the Mississippi Department of Child Welfare. This puzzled Rob. While he and his mother weren't close and might never speak to each other again, she loved children and he'd have bet she would have stepped in to claim the girl.

Tori.

That was his daughter's name. Five years old. Walking, talking, and cute as hell. He'd missed a lot. A whole hell of a lot. Birth. Diaper changes. First word. First step. First hair cut. Saying I love you. Tucking her in at night.

She was, as he thought before, an extension of himself. But more than that, much more. An improvement on him. With Ellen's guidance, the five years she'd been with her mother would not have been wasted. Ellen had deep set morals and an incredible sense of integrity. Surely, the man she'd chosen to replace Rob would be no less of a stand up act. Rob supposed that a long time ago, he'd been such a person as well.

Would his daughter escape the wrath of evil he'd unleashed upon the world?

And if she did would she face life armed with the tools that would not only allow her to survive, but thrive as well?

If he'd only known. He would have made sure the child would never, ever have to worry about money. Perhaps that wasn't a lot in the eyes of a child, but as she grew to maturity the path she chose would be one she wanted, not one that would give her the biggest paycheck, the best medical insurance, and the best 401K. You had to admit, money wasn't everything, but try living without it. When the money situation was taken care of, the possibilities were endless.

If she remained in foster care for any significant amount of time, how would that change the woman she had been, only three days ago, destined to be? Seeing your parents murdered by zombies was bound to rock your world, and even if she recovered from that tragedy, would state

upbringing prepare you for the harshness of life without a family, without options?

It occurred to him that Tori might be able to corroborate his story with the authorities.

But that thought died quickly. Even if the President of the United States himself could bear witness to the events of Ellen's murder, would anyone even believe him? Much less a five-year-old girl who witnessed the death of her mother and the only father she knew by something she probably couldn't even explain anyway?

Rob yawned, fatigue beginning to overtake him. He popped his neck and readjusted his grip on the steering wheel. He was reaching for the foul concoction of gas station coffee, now cold, when he noticed the light from up ahead.

It glowed orange through the clear sheets of falling rain that, when combined, made the world appear fuzzy, slightly unfocused. Instinctively, Rob slowed the car.

The weather worsened. Lightning slashed across the sky like pulsing neon veins. The wind blew from the north, rocking the moderately heavy sedan. Thunder boomed over the car stereo. Perhaps it was these poor conditions that kept many motorists off the road. Or, more likely, it was the fact that Highway 83 actually ran into no man's land. There was only a trickle of traffic because no destination waited further north. But for whatever reason, Rob had seen only a handful of other travelers.

So what could possibly be the cause of the light? Could a fuel tanker have jackknifed? Was someone having themselves a bonfire in the middle of this storm, in the middle of the open road? Because there was one thing Rob was quite certain of: the glow up ahead looked like the luminescence of flame. An undoubtedly large, hulking fire right in his path.

It made no sense. But, over the last forty-eight hours of his life, what had?

Rob continued to slow. Already a tight ball of unease, as dense as a marble, began to grow in the pit of his stomach.

Then, it got worse.

The wind calmed and the storm ceased. Suddenly, visibility was clear. Flames stretched to the sky with greedy



fingers from a raging inferno only twenty yards ahead. He slammed on the brakes and the tires locked on the wet asphalt, sending the car into a spin.

But not before Rob saw the figure of a lone man step *from* the flames.

~ \* ~

She should have done her homework, Danielle supposed, after hearing the tenth jet of the evening pass overhead. The air force base was less than ten miles away. Even in this winter storm, the powers that be seemed to deem aerial exercises a priority. Maybe if she ever found herself in a situation that only a squadron of F-16's could assist her, her present dour opinion of the United States Air Force might change. Before making this trip, she'd never really thought about that particular branch of the armed forces at all. Now, she knew she would never forget it.

Without clicking off the TV, Danielle rose from the couch and wobbled to the right, reaching for the wall to steady herself. She was unsure just how much wine she'd had, but a glance at the near-empty bottle on the coffee table told the tale.

She headed for the master bath upstairs, albeit slowly and cautiously. With her present state of inebriation and a long hot shower, sleep just might come easy. Or at least easy enough.

The cabin was dim; Danielle had forgotten to switch on lights before settling in front of the boob tube. And now she regretted it.

Climbing the stairs in semidarkness, the only light the pale blue of the television, she was grateful for the banister which kept her from breaking her neck as she ascended.

In the bathroom, she undressed. She'd dressed warmly, a bit too warmly. A wool sweater and corduroy slacks. Hiking boots, Merrel's.

The master bath was large and upscale for a cabin smack dab in the middle of the wide open country. With an ornately tiled floor, a granite counter and a large wash basin with Kohler faucets, the room was decorated retro-western. That was the only way Danielle could describe it. Dark, rich browns. Deep scarlet. A bright but soft turquoise. The shower and tub were separate and while she loved a bubble

bath as well as any gal, especially in a wide garden tub, she turned her attention to the stand-alone shower. The large, frosted glass door was trimmed in silver framing, the edifice behind it grand. Within the stall, the walls were of rough concrete with intricate designs, all of a western motif, carefully carved into them. A large bench seat sat on either end of the shower while twin showerheads protruded from the walls directly above them.

This was a shower definitely not designed with the thought of mere bathing in mind. Perhaps the designer had a Casanova inclination.

But, she had to be honest, how many people rented a place like this by themselves?

Again, she thought of Rob. It wasn't only the spacious stall and the trappings of debauchery held within it.

It was the TV. She'd been watching a really bad reality show followed by the news. Not the locals going on about the crop predicament or the newest sanitation schedules, but national news.

And guess who'd been the lead story? Robert Caulder.

That persuaded her to go on and attempt to finish the bottle of Berringer.

He was a boy from Mississippi. A security guard with the literary talent to be this century's Stephen King. She, a wannabe literary agent, whose claim to fame was to be born to the Father of Mystery, Donovan Greer, and as a two-bit floozy not above jumping into bed with her boss.

Life was ironic, wasn't it? How two people with nothing could meet and the world would finally receive them, though they couldn't even get together properly.

But enough reflection.

Her neck was sore, her shoulders tense. She removed the last of her undergarments, placed a super-sized fluffy towel on the bar outside the door, and stepped into to the yawning cavern that was a shower. She adjusted the water and placed her hands against the wall as the hot, stinging water sluiced over her head and down her back.

Somewhere in the cabin came a sound: someone or something bumping into a chair or perhaps a low table.

Danielle perked her ears after she thought she heard a sound from somewhere in the cabin. She turned off the

water, listening, but the cabin was silent. She turned the water back on.

## ***Twenty Four***

Rob was able to control the spin, but only just barely. The tires squealed on the wet road, and the world outside the windshield and windows spun like a kaleidoscope of shadow and light. The Ford sedan whirled like a top: Rob was grateful the automobile was much heavier than it appeared.

When the spin finally stopped and the car fell still, the Ford faced north, the same direction he'd been going before losing control. The car was straight, in the center of the lane. The man stepped forward, closing to within fifty feet.

In the headlights, Rob was able to make out much detail of the stranger. Dressed in black—of course, what other color would he be wearing? He was either bald or his hair was shaved close to the scalp. Caucasian, but with a definite ethnic or exotic look about him. He was tall, appeared solid.

He seemed to have come from the fire, to have walked through the flames. But he was untouched by the blistering heat.

Rob's mouth was incredibly dry.

"Fuck this," Rob muttered. He slammed his foot down on the accelerator, aiming to pass a safe distance beside the man and drive straight through the hellfire if need be.

The man raised one arm.

The engine died instantly, the dashboard went dark, and the yellow light of the headlamps dissolved into nothing. The car didn't even idle down the highway until its momentum spent itself. It just stopped, almost before it even moved.

In the night, practically at the nose of the sedan, the

man stood. He radiated a soft red glow from his body, a bloodlike aura covering him.

Then Rob knew. The scalpel of memory sliced into his brain with enough force to make him flinch.

Rob knew this man, this stranger. He was the physical embodiment of the phantom stranger that tormented his dreams, both in sleep and during waking hours, for so very long. Now, with his features given the bluntness of reality and the scarlet shine swathing him, he was more hateful, even viler than Rob could ever remember him being in his memories.

The sick grin that slowly spread across the bastard's mouth was both obscene and unsettling.

"Enough," Rob said. He shoved open the car door and jumped out. The night air was biting cold, but also held a static charge like the atmosphere seconds before a powerful lightning strike.

The man remained motionless as Rob moved from the car and took slow, tentative steps in his direction.

"What do you want?" Rob shouted over the roar of the fire. It was incredibly loud. Unlike a wood fire, there was no crackle of tinder or of consumption. Only the sounds of the red and orange tendrils whipping the cold air like leather whips against the backs of unruly slaves.

"Do you hear me, you asshole? What do you want?" Rob's words were born not of courage or bravery but of desperation. Desperation to get to Danielle before it was too late. She was less than fifteen miles away and he didn't have time for this. Plus, he'd had his fill of this monster that had taken away whatever peace he might have had in life. Before, nothing could be done. Now, he was no longer a mental monster but one possessed of flesh, blood, and bone. Flesh could be torn, blood spilled, and bone cracked.

The man's absolute calm continued. He was nonplussed at Rob's rage. That unnerved him more than anything.

Rob moved closer.

He was within ten feet now.

Milky white orbs shone flatly where eyes should have been. The spheres looked almost iced over and if they'd been within a normal person's skull, Rob would have assumed

them to be blind. But the man Rob faced was no normal man, maybe no man at all. Was his flesh really just that or was he some type of projected delusion, residing only inside Rob's head?

The stranger made a slight movement with his left hand, just a small flick. It was enough for Rob to shift his offensive posture to a defensive one. The slight move was meant for Rob. Behind him, the Ford Avalon lurched into the air, rising fifty feet, then flew sideways as if by some invisible crane. It crashed into the ground a good distance from the road, but Rob could still feel the vibration of the impact through the soles of his shoes.

His eyes instantly veered back to the car at the grunt of the suspension system as it was freed of gravity's heavy hold.

Now, with the car folded and ruined in the distance, Rob looked back at the stranger.

The grin had grown into a full-blown smile. But the increased size of the expression did little to subtract from its sinister implications.

"You brought me way out here just to play games?" He was being foolish, consciously taunting the figure, but he couldn't help it. He'd had things his way too long to cower to some other man...or some other thing. Even if said man or thing could propel cars through the air with the smallest twitch of a hand. The situation was ludicrous. That, more than anything else, helped steel Rob. "You get bored living in my head?" Rob tapped his temple with a finger for emphasis. "Thought you might step out into the real world, raise a little hell?"

The man made no response. Only peered at Rob through whitened eyes.

When Rob spoke again, it was his voice but not his words. "*Death came...like a thief in the night.*" Rob blanched; the words astonished him. But they were familiar. All *too* familiar. They were the words that buzzed in his mind like an angry wasp when he awoke from his coma so many years ago. Begging, no, demanding, to be set free. They had been the first lines of his first novel.

Again, Rob spoke, "*And it did end just as it did begin, with a scream that tore through the night, powerful and*

*short.*" He remembered those words as well. That line was his favorite, almost classic in its prose.

Then he knew. The man-thing before him, whether real, aberration of the mind, or nothing at all, was more. "You're not only my tormentor but my muse as well. You are the thing that brings words to my mind." It felt good to choose his own words again and though they were not questions but statements, the man before him, his muse, answered with one single nod.

"Know that I am your master. You are but a servant to my will." The man did not speak, but used Rob as his mouthpiece.

"I serve no one."

"Ah, Robert Caulder. But you do. Every soul serves a master, yours serves me. As it has in this world, so it shall in the next."

"Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not quite ready to move on. So, if you'll kindly get the hell out of my way..."

"Danielle Greer?" the name tasted bitter on Rob's tongue. Whether it was the force that compelled him to speak or the name itself, he wasn't sure. "Such an unblemished soul. For now."

"You motherfucker!" Rob ran at the man, and was within a yard when his feet left the ground. A grip seized him all over. It was like King Kong was lifting him.

"You think this is a game, Robert Caulder? Do you think this is a story of selling your soul to the devil for earthly rewards?" The words were copper in Rob's mouth. It hurt his lungs to even mutter them. The man-thing laughed. But the laugh came not from Rob but from the muse himself. It was a horrible sound, like a million fingernails scraping down a million blackboards.

"I chose you. There was no deal. There is a devil, I assure you, but he cowers like a dog in my presence." The words came from Rob's tormentor, the voice matching the laughter in its sinister tone.

Rob was lifted higher. He noticed the muse raised only one finger, his index, as he directed Rob higher and higher. Then, in an instant, the figure rose as well and was soon level with Rob.

"It's time we left this place, my servant. I have much

in store for you.”

The invisible grip tightened, but loosened as the noise of a big engine sounded in the distance. It was approaching.

The figure snarled and his eyes changed from frosty white to a blaring yellow.

*That can't be good*, Rob thought just a split-second before his world came crashing down.

~ \* ~

Danielle Greer had been an overweight child. From the age of four or five right up until her freshman year of high school, there had been more of Danielle than either she or her cruel classmates could stand.

While pretty even then, her father's wealth and her angelic face—which with the extra weight looked more cherubic than angelic—did not save her the indignity of the other children's wrath.

She was called four-by-four, bubble butt, Twinkie toes, and as she progressed in years, more, less repeatable names.

School, however, wasn't the only place that the young Danielle Greer suffered such assaults. Donovan Greer, even while attempting to raise his daughter alone, was an unkind man. Much of it Danielle blocked from memory. But some stayed with her, lingering like a cloud over her sunniest days.

Donovan Greer was a good-looking, even handsome man. He kept himself in peak condition and even had a wicked reputation with the women. The people who knew him then couldn't understand why he chose to raise a child on his own. While intelligent and wise, he was also selfish, cold, and at times, given to the darkest maliciousness.

So, it was no great surprise the great writer Donovan Greer, the Hemingway of his time, chose instead of helping his daughter with obesity—which was surely nothing more than a sign of insecurity—he lauded her for it. He took her to a therapist when someone on the outside looking in mentioned that his pretty little girl was no longer fitting into her clothing.

The therapist deemed Danielle's compulsion to eat as a form of compensation for the love she was denied by her father and because of the absence of a mother in the



household.

In this day and age, a man like Donovan might have put a little stock in the therapist's words. But not then. After only two sessions, he pulled his daughter from the appointment book and decried the diagnosis as nothing but pure bullshit. He said he loved his daughter as much as any other father, and that her mother, whom he discussed only rarely, was a greedy, two-bit gold-digger, and both father and daughter were better off without her.

That transpired when Danielle was six. For the next seven years, whenever possible, she consumed ice cream, milk, cookies, snack cakes, and anything else she could get her hands on. Donovan went as far as padlocking the pantry to keep his daughter from the food. Once he'd even let the house run out of everything except the barest necessities. But that had done very little to hinder Danielle's intake of unhealthy food. Just like an addict searching for a fix, she found ways.

It was only when she reached ninth grade did her father's contempt and her classmates scorn combine to make a wicked enough brew that Danielle decided to take action. By action, she searched out something to take the place of the comfort that food had always provided.

She found that comfort in the most unlikely place.

Having been the daughter of a successful, famous writer, Danielle strayed away from books, libraries, and bookstores. She preferred television over books and music—over it all.

But during a study hall period, Danielle found herself in need of something to do. While she was as bright as anyone else, she made poor grades and could never find the energy to really care. So, bored and with no one to talk to, she managed to extract a pass from the monitor to go to the library. Why, she didn't know. Maybe she'd find a magazine to thumb through or something else to occupy her time.

What she found, in a round about way, was a career.

The Gilby Franklin High School was a large school, many of its students' parents earning well over the median income, so befitting its large campus, manicured football fields, soccer fields, baseball fields, and new basketball gymnasium, the library, too, was large and filled with

countless tomes. The card catalog covered half a wall, and there were no less than three full-time librarians on duty at all times, with several students working as aides.

Finding no magazine worth her attention in the periodical section, Danielle hesitantly made her way to the wing of the library designated for fiction books. Just for shits and giggles, she looked for one of her father's books. She wasn't all that surprised to see an entire display devoted to him plus several of his other novels shelved, as well.

But she didn't pick any up. Instead, she kept looking. She came across a hardcover historical romance novel, picked it up, and checked it out.

She returned the next day and dropped the book in the return bin. She'd begun the book in study hall and had finished just this morning, having read the entire book in less than twenty-four hours. She selected two more novels, a contemporary romance and a thriller. This was Friday. By Sunday evening, she'd finished both.

During all that time she hardly took time to eat a meal. She was captivated by the worlds that unfolded, simply by turning the page.

She became a frequent visitor to both the school library and the city library downtown. The local bookstore, *Between the Covers*, also got to know her very well.

During the summer break between her ninth and tenth grade year, Danielle, who could rarely be seen without a book in her hand, went through a dramatic transformation. Reading slowly replaced the hole inside her that calories had filled for so long. Eating was now only a necessity instead of a priority.

Reading, however, wasn't her only habit. Danielle learned that in addition to immensely enjoying the books she read, she also had a talent for grammar, punctuation, and could spot flaws in characterization, theme, and plot. While she was sure writing must be a lot harder than it looked, she was surprised at the simple mistakes she found in the most popular books. While fiction demanded that certain grammatical rules be bent if not broken entirely, some of the stories she read suffered too much for too little pay off.

She began the habit of, when finished with a book, using one of her father's discarded Smith Corona typewriters

to compile a report on the book. This document was much more than a simple book report, recounting briefly the synopsis of the book. She also detailed changes that should be made and how the book could be changed, only slightly, to make it much more effective.

She did this all through her summer break. When she returned to school in the fall, she saw an opening for a columnist in the school newspaper. She applied. But, because of her poor grades and severe lack of popularity, she was only admitted to the staff as a probationary contributor.

That quickly changed. The editor of the paper was a senior and on her way to bigger and better things. She found Danielle's input invaluable and quickly groomed her as her replacement. By her junior year, Danielle had slimmed down considerably, and was actually getting asked out often. She was also a straight-A student, and editor of the paper.

She graduated with honors and quickly was accepted by a superb college with an outstanding newspaper. While it had been the usual custom for journalism majors to be appointed to the hierarchy of the paper, Danielle worked her way up, and with dual degrees in business and English, became invaluable to the paper.

And that's how she'd made her way from a roly-poly child to a literary agent who now owned her own, very successful, agency.

But, throughout the years, the need to indulge in calorie-loaded food never quite left her. In times of great depression, it still hit. Just like when she'd lost her job at William Morris and now, when Robert Caulder was foremost on her mind.

She was still showering when that all too familiar ache began to churn in her belly.

The cabin had to have a hot water heater the size of a swimming pool. She wasn't sure how long she'd been in but it had been a while. Still, the water ran warm, though its effects had long since dulled. What she needed was chocolate, or cheese, or cookies. Perhaps all three.

Danielle turned off the water, pushed open the door and towed herself off. The bathroom seemed darker even though all the lights were still aglow.

When she was dry enough, she pulled on a pair of gray cotton lounge pants and a lighter gray, long-sleeve tee shirt. She spent only a few minutes brushing her hair and brushing her teeth. Had to have clean chompers when you went on a binge.

She headed downstairs, wondering what she could find to fill that hole in her gut, when she noticed the light she'd used to ascend the stairs, that of the TV, was no longer on. The hot water seeped away the effects of the wine and Danielle was a little drowsy, but otherwise clearheaded.

She was sure she'd left the TV on. Now, however, the bottom of the stairs was drenched in black. There was a light switch on the wall at the foot of the stairs so she used the banister to guide her way. But when she flipped the switch nothing happened.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Something did happen. Just not what she'd expected.

Light appeared, but not that of a cozy 60- or 75-watt incandescent bulb. The fixture suspended from the ceiling, a wagon wheel which held five bulbs, exploded with blinding white light.

As the streamers of fire died away into darkness, Danielle felt something, feathery but stout, grip her neck.

## ***Twenty Five***

Judging by the pitch and timbre of the approaching engine, an eighteen wheeler was closing in on them. It had the heavy bass sound of a diesel and was moving fast. Very fast.

Rob looked at the stranger, his tormentor and muse. The yellow light that shone from his eyes did not put one in the mind of sunshine and springtime.

Suddenly, the grip that had held him released, and Rob plummeted to the ground as the large truck's powerful headlights struck him. The man still hung there, suspended by some type of magic or evil force.

The truck was closing, but Rob couldn't bring himself to move. Frozen in place, his feet felt like they weighed a couple hundred tons. The levitating man tented his fingers together, then separated them, pointing ten digits down at him.

Small bolts of electricity, much like blue-white lightning, crackled at the tips.

The truck driver must have seen Rob standing stock still in the middle of the road. The air horn of the big diesel crashed through the air, but it could have been a nuclear blast for all the good it did. Rob strained against invisible bonds, but he was stuck and stuck good.

This was it. His final moment.

Time did not stand still. If anything, it accelerated. Rob was all too aware of the menace that faced him to the front, and the certain destruction that quickly approached from the rear. The wind whistled in his ears. Cold and biting. But the air was the only thing not presently threatening

his life.

The beams playing across him from the hulking truck grew brighter. Brighter. And brighter.

The finger-sprouted bolts of lightning did not strike him, but seemed to be the emanation of the invisible hold that shrouded him. A transparent cloak that kept him still until the tons of steel and chrome bore down on him, turning him into Rob soup.

He thought of the daughter he would never know.

He thought of the woman he loved.

Tori.

Danielle.

And he thought about the father he never met.

In a split second, a thought ignited inside him, and he realized what he'd missed about the stranger. It was queer how quickly your mind can work when a painful death is imminent.

"Father," Rob croaked. His body was held so tightly that his lungs couldn't properly inflate and his words sounded more as if they came from a toad than a man. But the word had the desired effect.

The stranger flinched, if only slightly. But his sudden confusion was evident. Rob could feel the tiniest ease in the hold. A fire flicked in the yellow eyes.

"John. Johnny Krueger. That's your name, isn't it?" Rob couldn't believe he hadn't noticed the resemblance earlier. Both he and his muse were about the same height and almost exactly the same build. Bald, the man didn't share Rob's haircut, but put a matching wig on him and the two could have quite possibly passed for twins.

Well, besides the baleful eyes and the glowing red aura emanating from the body.

But the yellow light which had blazed, dulled. It was not replaced with the milky ice white of earlier, but of true eyes. Human eyes.

Rob felt the heat of the truck as it bore down on him like a raging locomotive.

In the space of a millionth of a second, Rob felt a barrage against his body, an explosion against his senses that sent him flying with the force of a ball out of a cannon.

~ \* ~

Fear quickly won out over surprise as Danielle Greer attempted to wrestle the hold from around her neck. But it was a futile gesture. The hands gripping her neck weren't really hands at all. They were...well, they were nothing.

She tried to understand the constriction against her throat and the absence of anything but her own flesh beneath her hands. Her throat was being squeezed, but her hands felt no attacker.

Tiny white dots began to dance in the darkness. As they multiplied she realized that the tiny pinpricks were a sign that she was losing the battle to push air into her lungs. The invisible fingers were tightening, tightening.

Was it a reaction to the wine?

Had the hot shower and alcohol combined to give her a...seizure? It was the only thing she could think of. This was no stroke, no heart attack. There had to be some logical explanation, some reasonable cause for the ever-constricting sensation around her windpipe. A medical reason.

Shadows and darkness weren't anything to fear. She'd always known it was what lurked in the gloom that was the real monster. Not absence of light. It was the unknown that terrified. Nothing, no matter what it was, was all that terrible once it could be seen and some measure of understanding could be gleaned.

Danielle's head became too light and dizziness rushed in like a high wave crashing against jagged rocks.

*I'm dying.*

~ \* ~

Death felt completely unlike what Rob thought it might. But then he realized he wasn't yet dead. He wasn't even in pain. He opened his eyes to find himself twirling head over heels through the air. One second he saw a cloudy sky. The next, he watched as the semi-truck rushed past, beneath him.

But he was in no freefall. He came down, his feet touching the ground gently, almost gingerly. He looked up just in time to see a figure emerge between the taillights of the trailer the big rig had been hauling.

But the figure did not look as it had only moments ago.

It had completely transformed.

Into Robert's father.

The man who approached him looked identical to the album covers and the websites that Rob visited after learning his real father's identity. He hadn't aged a single day in over thirty-five years. As he sauntered up to Rob, it was easy to see how this lithe, powerful figure had been a sex symbol back in the 70's. He wore his hair long, down past his shoulders. His pants were black leather and his white silk shirt was buttoned only halfway up. He looked like a better-looking Jim Morrison. He walked confidently, with a nonchalance about him that seemed to say, "Fuck it, everything will be fine."

But Rob knew better, much better. Sons didn't get visits from their fathers in the middle of a North Dakota highway so late in the evening, especially when said father had been dead almost four decades.

Johnny stopped five feet from his son. Rob could smell sulfur, or perhaps even brimstone in the cold wind.

"A great gift is also a great curse," Johnny said. His voice was much different than before. No longer awful, it was deep, but echoed as if from a great distance. "Mine took my love, my sanity, and then my life." His words were measured, almost clipped.

"I didn't ask for this," Rob screamed.

Johnny gave him a sad smile, evident in even the pitch black of the dark night. "Son, no one ever asks for a gift or a curse. But that doesn't stop it from being given. It was no deal with the devil. You did not sell your soul for earthly rewards. It was taken."

"By you, my own father?"

The sound was like a snicker, but worse. "No. I am only a servant to a more sinister thing. But enough. Time wastes. The woman you love still lives. For now. If you wish to save her, my son, you must hurry. My love for you will buy time, but very little."

"How? I'm still miles away."

Rob's father didn't answer. At least not verbally. He extended his right arm, and from his outstretched hand, the sparkle of energy crackled. Bolts of energy flew out toward the ruined car. Rob watched, transfixed, as the car rose in thin air, then moved toward the road. With a creak it settled



on the asphalt beside Rob. The body was bent, the headlights busted, but it was nowhere near the condition that Rob would've guessed.

"Hurry."

Rob was focusing on the flying car, but when his father spoke he turned back to him. Or rather where he had been. Nothing stood ahead but open road.

Rob had a lot of questions. Not the least of which was how he was going to save Danielle from whatever evil waited for her.

Robert Caulder had met his father, who just minutes ago tried to smash him into the business end of a rocketing Mack truck, but then resurrected his vehicle and in a roundabout way told him he loved him.

But the time for thinking was over, as was the time for questions. It was time for action and come hell or high water, Rob was ready.

"Rock and roll, Johnny. Rock and roll."

Rob slammed the car into gear and shot down the highway like a demon on the run from hell.

Except, of course, he was quite possibly running right *into* hell.

~ \* ~

Danielle's frantic mind offered up a quick and silent prayer as her life bled out of her. She hadn't awakened this morning with the thought that this would be her last day to live. But now, so near the end, it seemed just as good a day as any.

A brilliant blast of pure white light erupted around her, blinding her with its incredible intensity. The hold from her neck dissipated.

She fell to the floor, writhing and gasping for air. Tears welled in her eyes as the brilliance faded.

But every light in the cabin save for the wagon wheel light fixture was now on. Not only were they on, but each bulb in each light, whether overhead fixture, ceiling fan, or lamp glowed with a light much more powerful than should've been possible.

She looked back to where she had been standing. Tendrils of black, almost like shadows, thrashed as if in tremendous torment. The tendrils looked similar to the

tentacles of a large octopus, minus suckers, minus definite form. It was if they were made of dark gray smoke.

*The light must hurt them. Sting them, even.*

Danielle's brief reprieve from the tendrils ended as they seemed to adapt to the light. They did not sprout from either the wall or the floor, but out of midair. They began to grow, to reach toward her. Their origination, which was several feet above the floor, did not change, but they reached out, stretching but losing none of their mass. It was like rope being threaded through a hold.

They moved slowly, almost hesitantly, at first. Then they struck at her.

Danielle twisted to her stomach, her head still swimming too much for her to stand. She began a desperate crawl away from the tentacles, from the tendrils of death. She scraped her nails into the carpet frantically, trying to dig in with her toes. She made a valiant lurch forward, but screamed when a cold, hard, though seemingly insubstantial tendril grabbed her ankle.

It started to pull. Pull her backward.

That was when the front door, less than ten feet from her head, burst open, and Rob Caulder charged in. He looked harried and frayed, as though he hadn't slept in days. But at that moment Danielle considered him the best-looking man she'd ever seen.

"Rob!"

To his credit, he reacted quickly. Without a word, he ran to her and grabbed hold of both her arms. He pulled with all his might; the veins bulged in his arms, his neck, and his forehead. She helped as much as she could, pushing with her free leg.

"Help me, damn it!"

Rob doubled his efforts and the tendril's grasp broke free with an elastic *snap*.

"Up, up. We gotta get out of here."

Danielle was in no mood to argue. She allowed Rob to haul her to her feet. Swimming head or not, it was time to move.

They were through the doorway, feet smacking on the wooden front porch when they heard a terrible cry from behind, but neither one stopped to investigate.

All their attention was on fleeing, but Danielle almost tripped over Rob as he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Oh shit," he said. Danielle looked up to see what he was talking about.

"My God," she said and defeat flooded through her like acid in her veins.

## ***Twenty Six***

Both Rob's rent-a-car and the Danielle's Jeep Liberty were raging infernos. Even on the porch, the superheated air raised the hair on their arms, and threatened to pull sweat from their pores.

The two looked out on the flames, seeing the fires for what they truly were: bonfires on which their hopes burned.

"What's...what's happening, Rob?"

He turned and gazed at her. She looked frightened, no, terrified. He couldn't blame her. His own terror was a very real thing. But he felt more than that. He felt pity for her. It was his concern, his love for her that placed her in harm's way.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

"Why? What's going on?" Her voice trembled.

"It's my fault. All of it. I'm so sorry." He was about to expound, but the Jeep exploded like a giant firecracker. Flaming debris rained down in every direction. Instinctively, he hugged her tight, protecting her. Piercing fragments of hot metal stabbed his back. He pushed her forward. "Go, go."

"Where?" she asked, although she was moving now.

"Out of here."

They jumped off the edge of the porch, Danielle first, Rob immediately after. He noticed she was barefoot, but there was no time to worry about that. A few bruises and cuts on the soles of her feet would be the least of her worries if they didn't get away.

Away from what, he didn't know.

They rounded the cabin, the grass filled with late night

dew. In the back yard, shadows reigned supreme. The sky was still overcast and not even the pitiful light of one single star shone down. The darkness was interrupted only by three pathetic squares of light. The windows of the cabin.

They ran, aimlessly.

Their only hope was the tree-line that surrounded the property on three sides. They bolted for the pines as fast as their legs would carry them.

Then something even more amazing than hand-thrown lightning bolts, flying Fords, and smoky octopus tentacles occurred.

A doorway opened in the middle of the lawn. A doorway of perfect white light, no larger than a standard door. Both Danielle and Rob skidded to an abrupt halt.

"What is that?" she asked.

But Rob knew the sight. Knew it very, very well. He'd dreamed about, or more accurately, had nightmares about that door for many, many nights. The mere sight of it caused him to tremble. And he shivered harder when he realized what was about to happen.

Someone stepped through the door.

It was no silhouette this time.

A man. Or at least a creature, humanoid in appearance, for Rob knew it was no man.

"Robert Caulder, I presume." His voice was remarkably tender, almost loving, and his speech the epitome of grandeur. "And...Danielle Greer."

"How did you know my name?" Danielle asked.

He moved closer to them. "You'll find that I know a great many things. But, I fear, the hour grows late and I've tired of playing with you."

"Leave her out of this. She has nothing to do with it."

"Oh, Robert, you are quite wrong. She has everything to do with it. I have no need of you, you see. Your soul is already mine. Signed, sealed, and delivered, I believe the phrase is. But you," he said pointing a finger at Danielle, "I would like you as well."

Rob studied the phantom. He appeared to be a silver-haired geriatric dressed in a black tunic. Like a monk of some strange religion, the leader of a weird cult.

"Rob? What's he talking about?"

"Oh, you mean the great Robert Caulder has never shared his deepest secret with you, the woman he loves? He's yet to tell you that before I intervened he was nothing more than an untalented, ambitious 'writer'?" He said the last word with such scorn Rob thought he might spit to cleanse his mouth of the word. "Then, I interceded, brought him fame, fortune, fulfillment."

"Your wife, her husband. You killed them!" Danielle yelled.

The accusation struck Rob's heart, but she was right. If only he'd died in the car accident, none of this would be happening. Ellen would still be alive and Danielle would be snuggled up and warm back in New York.

Had the books been worth it? Had the movies? The money, fame, and sex? The drugs?

No, of course not.

But all of it had been worth it to find Danielle. He felt more for her than he'd ever felt for anyone, even himself. The world would be a much sadder place without her. Like Tori, Danielle was a person the world would surely miss.

Him? The world wouldn't miss him at all.

He stepped in front of her. Between the dark figure and Danielle, Rob raised his head proudly. "If you want her," he raised his fists like a veteran boxer, "you'll have to deal with me."

"Rob...", Danielle began, but the figure waved her silent.

He arched an eyebrow and Rob was flung like a rag doll out of the way. "Easily accomplished." Then he glided toward Danielle. "My dear, I am Always, and you are...mine. For now and forever." His face transformed in that instant. A normal mouth was replaced by a yaw of countless yellow teeth with sharply pointed tips and his eyes turned the color of blood.

"That's my son, you asshole."

~ \* ~

Danielle turned to see another man step from nothingness and reach for Always. Long hair aside, he was the spitting image of Rob. But she'd never seen Rob in leather pants.

"This is no place for you, servant," Always snarled.

The man responded with a right hook to Always' chin in lieu of words. The boom resonated and echoed. Danielle stepped back.

The man that called Rob his son and Always began to fight. Their supernatural strength was apparent in each powerful movement. Each bone-crushing punch that connected was followed by hollow thuds. Danielle was amazed at not only the barbaric scene of battle, but at Always' agile movements. At first, he appeared much too old and frail to move so quickly. Apparently, that first appearance was seriously deceiving.

Quickly, the altercation escalated from mere physical attacks to those that Danielle had only seen in movies.

Rob's father shot lightning bolts from his hand as Always brought up a finger and deflected the energy with what looked like a shield, only visible because of the blue tingles that rolled off of it like droplets of water.

"I have served you long enough, Always," Rob's father said through clenched teeth. Strain showed in bulging veins on his forehead as the bolts continued to fly from his fingers.

From the corner of her eye, Danielle detected movement. It was Rob, she'd almost forgotten him. She moved to him. He was trying to rise, but had so far been unable to do so. She pulled him to his feet. He looked a little worse for wear. But he didn't seem to be in pain.

"Are you okay?"

He was about to answer when he saw that the man tussling with the figure from the doorway was his father.

~ \* ~

Johnny Krueger had waited a very long time for this. But, until seeing his son, his own flesh and blood, out on the desolate highway, he hadn't even known it.

There was no escape for him, and probably none for Rob. A being like Always, molded and breathed to life in the very hottest fires of hell, could not be beaten by a single man.

Always was eternal, forever graced with the ability to meddle in affairs of which he had no business. Every thirty-six years he was allowed to physically enter this world. During that time he no longer had to rely on his servants and his power over the human race from afar. He could enter this

realm and stand upon the ground just as a mortal man. But knocking the bastard's teeth down his throat before he left was something Johnny truly yearned to do. Payback would last forever and ever. For both his and his son's soul, Always should at least feel a little pain.

Johnny saw Robert and the woman watching, transfixed by the sight before them. He wished he could tell them to go, to run. Not that it would do any good. As long as the door remained open, Always could remain in this world indefinitely.

That gave him an idea.

~ \* ~

"Father!" Rob screamed. He watched as the older being began to overpower Johnny. He scanned all around for a weapon to use against the older man. But what? There was nothing but a few twigs and small snapped branches that the storm had blown in from the woods.

Rob flinched as Johnny was knocked to the ground, to his knees. And still he fought.

Always advanced toward his father, but the bolts of energy continued to flow from Johnny's hands. It gave him no small satisfaction to see that Always strained as much or more than his father.

"The door, Rob. If he goes back in...he's gone."

"What does he mean?" Danielle demanded.

But Rob was not there to answer her. Already he was in motion. His legs moving like pistons in a well-oiled engine. Pumping harder with each step.

"No!"

Behind him, Danielle screamed, but he couldn't stop. He had to strike while Always was preoccupied with his father. It was evident that the demon or devil or whatever category the bastard fit into was powerful, and it was also unlikely that Rob could survive his full attention.

He lowered his upper body, streamlining himself into a speeding human battering ram.

Always lifted his eyes at the last second but it was already too late. Rob had reached terminal velocity and the force behind the impact was just enough to knock Always off balance.

As he teetered to the side, Johnny stood, and



unleashed bolts of energy from both palms that, upon contact, blew Always from his feet and through the open door of immaculate light.

And it was done.

Nothing remained of Always except an open door into who knew what. And Rob didn't want to know.

The blast of energy knocked his father to the ground. Rob, still shaken, moved toward him. "Need a hand?" Rob asked, the smile impossible to keep from his mouth.

Johnny Krueger, perhaps one of the biggest rock stars of the 1970's, looked up. "Thought you'd never ask."

"Rob? Rob, are you okay?" Danielle ran to the two men.

Rob looked at his father, then at her. "Yeah, thanks to him." He nodded his head toward the older man.

Then she hit him. Not hard, but hard enough. "You almost killed yourself, you damn fool. Didn't you think it would be a good idea to tell me to be on the lookout for assholes that can make shadows, strangle people and open holes to other dimensions in the back yard?"

"Well...I...uh."

"Excuse me, miss," Johnny said, turning to Danielle. He extended his hand. "My name's John. You must be my son's..."

"Friend," Rob said.

"Girlfriend," Danielle said at the same time. It was a rather silly moment.

"Well, good. It's nice to know that he's in good hands." Then he turned toward the open door.

"Where are you going?"

John turned and looked at his son. His face was sad, resigned. "Robert, this is no longer my world. I don't belong here anymore. My place is through this door. With Always."

"That's crazy," Danielle said. "You've made him an enemy. You'll be fighting from now until—"

"The end of time," Rob finished.

Johnny nodded. Then, he touched Rob on the shoulder. "Until I go, the door remains open, and that's just no good. Besides, it was worth it. I love you, son."

Rob's eyes began to water. It wasn't fair. He'd finally met his father and watched as he'd sacrificed an eternity just

to save him. He didn't know what to say. Neither did Danielle, which came as a surprise. So without another word, Johnny Krueger, his father, entered the doorway.

And Always stepped through just as Johnny entered, his face a mask of horror and rage.

"Rob. No!"

It was too late. Rob made up his mind in a fraction of a moment. *Enough of this. To hell with the consequences.*

He jumped through the air, catching Always around the neck with both hands, his momentum enough to hammer them both through the light. The night echoed with the slamming of the door. Danielle was alone in the darkness.

It happened so swiftly she didn't realize he was really gone. Robert Caulder was no longer in this world.

The wind did not stir. The pine stood still.

Danielle began to cry and she cried for a very long time.

## ***Epilogue***

*Six years later*

"It's bedtime, honey," Danielle called from the open door of the den. In front of the television, a very pretty dark haired girl sat cross-legged in the floor.

"Already?"

Danielle had to smile. The girl almost whined the word. But it was getting late, even for a Friday night. Unbelievably well-behaved and gracious, the girl's only hang-up was going to bed. *If that's all that bothers her, I've got it made.*

At length, the eleven-year-old stood and, using the remote control, switched off the TV. Already in PJ's, she'd bathed and brushed her teeth an hour ago.

"Come on, I'll tuck you in," Danielle said. That seemed to brighten the child's mood. "Okay. Will you read, too?"

"Of course."

In her bedroom, the girl jumped into bed and waited as Danielle pulled the covers up over her. The bedspread was fluffy and warm. Though the heat was on, the house was old and given to the occasional draft. Rochester could be very chilly this time of year. Especially at night.

"What do you want to hear tonight?"

"The same one."

"Wouldn't you like to hear a Harry Potter or maybe Lemony Snicket?"

"Unh-uh. The same one, please."

"Darling, it gives you nightmares."

"But I *like* it."

"Oh, all right," Danielle relented as she always did.

She took her customary seat in the wooden rocker beside the bed. She picked the book up from the floor, where it had lain since last night. It was a hardcover, and well worn. She used a ribbon to mark her place and opened the book to the last read passage. Clearing her throat, Danielle began to read:

*And the wind blew hard at the eaves, the storm impending and close.*

"Mommy, the first part. Just once, please."

Danielle expected as much. It had been a request since the book was published five years ago and the child first heard it. While occasionally the two shared other books, they always seemed to come back to this one.

"Okay, darling. Just once."

"Okay. Thank you."

Danielle flipped the book shut and opened it again. She passed the blurb pages, the copyright and title pages, and came to a stop at the dedication. Since the author had been dead when the book went to print, Danielle had seen fit to write the dedication herself. Somehow, she didn't think the author would mind.

*To Tori, for the life I made much better than my own, Dad.*

Tori closed her eyes and smiled as she read the line, looking pleased and happy, like she'd just eaten a Hershey bar.

Danielle turned back to the ribbon and began to read. Within two chapters, Tori was snoozing. She stood from the chair and gently placed the book, one of the last Rob wrote, in the seat. She stepped quietly over to Tori and planted a soft kiss on the girl's forehead.

She pushed the door open as she left, careful not to close it completely.

Downstairs, she fixed a cup of instant coffee in the microwave. At the fridge, she stopped and admired the crafts and drawings Tori had made for her. Danielle felt very lucky but at the same time very sad for the child.

Danielle was all Tori had.

Her mother, father, and stepdad were all dead. Or at least she supposed Rob was dead. Though in what state he

was actually in was beyond contemplation. He and his father were in Always' domain. And she really didn't want to think about that. But at least Rob had his father, and Johnny had his son.

Rob's mother was found dead in her home. Her body nailed to the bedroom wall with large spikes. A crucifixion. Her eyelids and mouth had been stitched shut with strands of her own hair. In her blood, in an arch of above her, was written one word: *Lily*.

It took two years for Danielle's petition for adoption to be granted. It cost a lot of time and money but she was more than willing to spend both for Tori.

When Tori finally moved in, Danielle bought a big house in upstate New York and handed over the reigns of her agency to Glenda. Who, by the way, was doing an outstanding job. Danielle still owned the agency and still ran things from afar. The work she was required to do could be done here, from her computer.

Tabby, Rob's former personal assistant, had also helped. Rob had given her power of attorney over his finances after an especially dangerous binge on cocaine. The woman had the say over millions of dollars and every aspect of Rob's literary estate.

Between her and Danielle, they negotiated a very good book deal with Rob's remaining manuscripts as well as for his backlist. The money went into a trust account for Tori. When she turned twenty-one, the money would be hers. One hundred three million dollars at last count. With interest, the figure would do nothing but grow. In the meantime, well, Danielle wasn't exactly at the poverty level, either.

She often wondered, though, what Rob would think of her raising his child. She was careful to keep his memory alive. An entire bookshelf in Tori's room was filled with nothing but books by her father.

But there was more to Robert Calder than his books, much more. It could be argued that the books were not his, not entirely, but Always'.

Her memories, however, were *all* him. From the shy young man she'd fallen in love with to the confident, professional man the entire world adored.

Danielle downed her cup of coffee and went to the

hallway closet. She opened it and pulled out a large Fed Ex box. The delivery had been made today while Tori was out back playing with the family dog, Frisco, a jubilant golden retriever that seemed to love Tori with all his heart.

She'd placed the order earlier in the week and though it was quite a while to Christmas, and Tori's birthday had already come and gone, Danielle wanted to give it to her first thing in the morning, before breakfast.

It thrilled Danielle to no end to bestow gifts on the young child. Tori had saved her as much as she'd saved Tori. The two years Tori had spent in foster care had to have been rougher than the two years Danielle spent after Rob's death.

Damn, she loved that man.

With a steak knife from the kitchen, Danielle cut the tape that secured the box. From within, she pulled a collection of art supplies: paints, brushes, canvas, and even a painter's hat. Danielle thought Tori would be pleased. Very pleased.

She was always drawing, coloring, and seemed to have some talent. No mere stick figures and struggling to stay inside the lines for Tori. Danielle was sure that every mother, whether biological, step-, or adoptive, felt like their child had more talent than other children, but Danielle was convinced of Tori's.

While her grandfather had been a famous musician, her father a successful novelist, all by the hands of Always, even fear couldn't keep Danielle from nurturing the innate ability of Tori's to create images on paper that not only compelled wonder, but also awe.

She just hoped Always never met this sweet child. But if he ever did, there would be hell for him to pay. Courtesy of a literary agent and loving *mother* by the name of Danielle Greer.

# About Keith

At the age of 12, Keith read Dean Koontz's *The Voice of Night*. Thus, began his love affair with the things that go bump in the night and the things that are not easily explained. *Bestseller* is the author's fourth novel. Currently, he lives in a small town in the American South with his family and is hard at work on his next novel. Visit Keith online at [www.keithlatch.com](http://www.keithlatch.com)

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